

Return Migration in Northern Central America

Available Data Sources

Jeremy Harris
Pablo Cortés Sánchez
Juan Pablo Alvarez Enríquez
Gabriell Duarte
Rudy Martínez

Inter-American Development Bank
Migration Unit

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Acronyms

CAMR	Centros de Atención al Migrante Retornado / Returned Migrant Assistance Centers
COMAR	Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados / Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance
CONAMIGUA	Consejo Nacional de Atención al Migrante de Guatemala / National Council for Guatemalan Migrant Assistance
CONMIGHO	Observatorio Consular y Migratorio de Honduras / Consular and Migration Observatory of Honduras
DGME	Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería / Office for Migration and Foreign Nationals
EHPM	Encuesta de Hogares de Propósitos Múltiples / Multipurpose Household Survey
EMIF	Encuestas sobre Migración en las Fronteras de México / Migration Surveys at Mexico's Borders
ENCOVI	Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Vida / Guatemala's National Survey of Living Conditions
EPHPM	Encuesta Permanente de Hogares de Propósito Múltiple / Permanent Multipurpose Household Survey
GAMI	Gerencia de Atención al Migrante / Migrant Services Management Unit
IGM	Instituto Guatemalteco de Migración / Guatemalan Migration Institute
INM	Instituto Nacional de Migración / National Institute of Migration
ODS	Observatorio de Desarrollo Social / Social Development Observatory
SEDESOL	Secretaría de Desarrollo Social / Secretariat of Social Development
SEGOB	Secretaría de Gobernación de México / Mexican Ministry of Interior
SIAMIR	Sistema de Atención al Migrante Retornado (SIAMIR) / Returned Migrant Attention System
SRECI	Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores y Cooperación Internacional / Secretariat of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation



Executive Summary

The situation of returned migrants occupies an increasingly prominent place on the public agenda in the countries of Northern Central America (NCA) – Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. The number of people returning to these countries, particularly from Mexico and the United States, has risen in recent years, and current migration trends suggest that the figure will continue to grow. Since 2022, the Board of Directors of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) has authorized the Migration Unit to provide non-reimbursable grants and other instruments to support these countries in addressing the challenges of receiving and reintegrating this population.

The IDB and the NCA governments quickly identified the need for structured data on the dynamics of return migration. While the amount of available data is substantial and useful for certain purposes – and governments have made significant efforts to improve it – standardization is required for it to inform policy design and contribute to more effective reintegration programs.

This report represents the culmination of recent work with governments in the region. It aims to strengthen decision-making in Northern Central America so that reception and reintegration efforts for returnees can achieve better outcomes.

The report begins by comparing return flows from the United States and Mexico to NCA with global trends. It then provides detailed profiles of the Central American diaspora and examines encounters, detentions, and repatriations from the United States and Mexico. Next, it presents the data collected during reception in countries of origin, reviews the institutional framework responsible for receiving returnees, and describes the different information sources used to characterize this population. The key findings are summarized below.

Measuring and Analyzing Return Migration Worldwide

Forced return disrupts migrants' life plans and exposes them to severe economic, social, and emotional hardship. The number of migrants returning to NCA from the United States and Mexico exceeds that of all returnees from the European Union to the rest of the world combined.

Central Americans Abroad

The NCA diaspora is estimated at close to four million people, the majority of whom live in the United States. Between 60% and 80% of these migrants arrived in the United States over the past 20 years, driven by multiple factors that include unemployment, security concerns in their countries of origin, and the desire for family reunification. In 2024, this population sent an estimated \$39.7 billion in remittances to their countries of origin. These remittances represent approximately 25% of GDP in these countries, underscoring the importance of migrants for their economies.

Encounters, Detentions and Deportations

Trends at the US southern border suggest that the return of migrants will remain a key issue for NCA countries in the coming years. Mexico – historically a country of transit – has taken an active role in managing migration flows, both by returning migrants and by granting them international protection. Although the number of people from NCA detained at the border fell substantially in 2025, in 2024 this population accounted for 50% of all deportations from the United States.

Return and Reintegration

Between 2017 and 2024, returnees accounted for 2.4% of the population of El Salvador, 3.5% of that of Guatemala, 4.9% of that of Honduras, and 3.7% of the combined population of the NCA countries. These figures are drawn from a range of sources, including the International Organization for Migration (IOM), various national registers, reports by international organizations, and academic research. However, the volume and accuracy of the data collected vary considerably across locations and time periods, making it necessary to assess multiple data sources when designing public policies for returnees.

Administrative Data and Opportunities for Improvement

Although governments collect large quantities of administrative data on returnees, there is room to improve data consolidation and standardization. It is essential to continue improving data collection at reception centers, combining different sources, and strengthening collaboration among institutional actors. This report identifies opportunities to improve administrative records by analyzing patterns of repeated returns and by linking databases with information on access to public services and employment.

Statistical Tools for Analyzing the Stock of Returnees

One of the main obstacles to adequately characterizing returnees is that the statistical tools used in these countries – such as censuses and household surveys – contain very limited information on this population. This makes it difficult to accurately estimate the impact of return. According to the 2022 edition of Vanderbilt University's Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), among people from NCA countries who had attempted to emigrate and were back in their country of origin, between 10% (Guatemala) and 26% (Honduras) had been returned after reaching their destination (typically Mexico or the United States). This underscores the need for more suitable methodologies to collect relevant data on this population.

Legal and Institutional Frameworks in Northern Central America

NCA countries are making progress in strengthening their institutional capacities for the reintegration of returnees:

- **El Salvador** has enacted the Special Migration and Foreign Nationals Act and developed a Strategic Plan for the Reintegration of Returnees, designed with support from the IDB and the IOM and presented in September 2025.
- **Guatemala** is working to improve reception and reintegration efforts and to strengthen inter-agency coordination as part of its 2023 National Migration Policy. It launched the Plan Retorno al Hogar (Return Home Plan) in 2025.
- **Honduras** has a legal framework in place that lays the groundwork for more effective reintegration programs. In 2025, the Government of Honduras announced the Hermano, hermana, vuelve a casa (Brother, Sister, Come Home) plan to respond to new flows and changing profiles among returnees.

Introduction

Since 2017, according to official figures, nearly 1.2 million NCA migrants have been returned to their countries, posing a major challenge for these nations in terms of public administration and development. According to data published by the IOM, in 2019 – the year with the highest numbers on record – more than 108,000 Guatemalans, more than 109,000 Hondurans, and nearly 27,000 Salvadorans were returned to their countries. The total number of citizens returned to these three countries during the 2017–2023 period is equivalent to 3.3% of their combined population.

In general, these individuals will have made a substantial investment in emigrating. Many will have taken on debt, and upon being returned to their home countries, may have found it difficult to secure employment that would allow them to pay it off. For NCA countries, expanding opportunities for these people is crucial so they can contribute to economic growth and fully reintegrate into society.

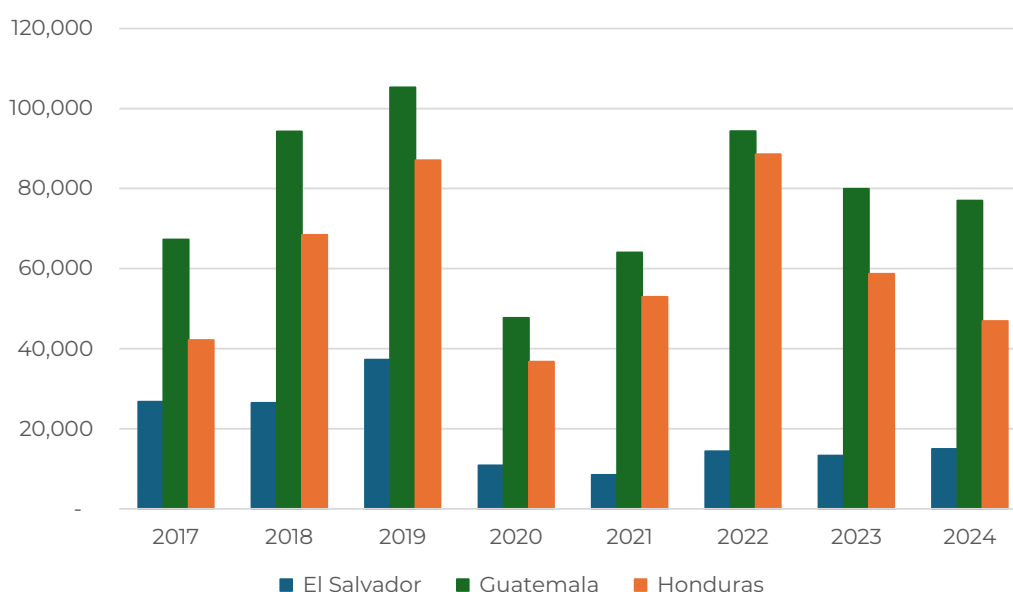


Figure 1. Number of Returnees to NCA Countries (2017–2024)

Source: IOM, Information Unit for Northern Central America.

Note: Data on returnees available at the IOM's website have not been updated since September 2025.

The number of returnees to NCA rose steadily between 2017 and 2019. After a decline attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting border closures, the upward trend resumed, reaching a new peak in 2022. In 2023, the figures decreased slightly. Data for 2024 show a similar pattern to 2023, with a modest decline in the number of returnees to Honduras and Guatemala, while returns to El Salvador held steady.

Types of Return

The IOM defines two categories of return migration (IOM, 2019a):

- i) Forced return: the act of returning an individual unwillingly to the country of origin, transit or to a third country that agrees to receive the person, generally carried out on the basis of an administrative or judicial act.
- ii) Voluntary return: the assisted or independent return to the country of origin, transit or another country based on the returnee's own decision.

Returns to NCA countries are predominantly forced. In most cases, those who return find themselves in a more vulnerable situation than before they emigrated, due to a range of factors, some of which have already been mentioned. These include debts incurred to finance their migration, family separation, and difficulties accessing employment and housing, among others (Abuelafia, Ruiz-Arranz, and Del Carmen, 2019). There is broad consensus in the literature that the flow of forced returns to NCA is one of the largest worldwide, both in absolute numbers and as a share of the population of the countries of return represented by this group (Quinteros, Aguilar, and Rivera, 2021; World Refugee & Migration Council, 2021).

According to the IOM's Migration Data Portal,¹ in 2020 nearly 290,000 irregular migrants in the European Union received return decisions.² However, only 62,000 ultimately returned to their countries, and only a fraction of these did so voluntarily. These figures cover 27 countries and involve migrants from across the world. By contrast, that same year more than 120,000 people were returned to the three NCA countries from the United States and Mexico. Although no statistics are available on how many migrants returned to NCA voluntarily, a 2018 survey conducted in Guatemala found that forced returns accounted for 85% of all returns (IOM, 2019b).

The circumstances of emigration have specific implications for the reintegration prospects of each group within the NCA returnee population.

1. First, some people are quickly returned after being encountered at the Mexican or US border.³ These individuals come to the attention of migration authorities in the destination country (most often, the United States), or when found to be in an irregular situation while transiting a third country (typically Mexico).

2. Second, some people reach the United States and apply for asylum.⁴ They can remain in the country while their case is considered by an immigration court. If the application is denied, return proceedings are initiated. While their asylum claim is being processed, it is common for these migrants to work, even if only informally.

3. Third, some people reside in a destination country for a period of time while in an irregular situation or under a temporary permit, and are subsequently deported either because of their irregular status or because they have broken a law. Like those in the second group, these people may have gained work experience and built up savings or sent remittances.

1. Available at www.migrationdataportal.org/.

2. A return decision is an official order that requires an irregular migrant to leave the country, usually within a specified period for voluntary departure, after which the person may be forcibly removed.

3. "Encounter" refers to the moment when a migrant is detected, intercepted, or apprehended by a migration authority, usually at the border or while traveling irregularly through a country.

4. In the United States, asylum refers to protection requested after entering the country. This differs from "refugee status," which, in US terminology, applies when protection is requested before crossing the border. In Mexico, the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) uses the term *solicitudes de refugio* (requests for international protection).

Returnees in the second and third groups face different reintegration challenges than those in the first group. To design policies and investments that support reintegration, the second and third groups should be profiled in order to understand how the skills and capacities they acquire vary with the length of stay in the destination country. The needs and resources of people who spent only a few weeks abroad – mostly in transit or in immigration detention – differ markedly from those of individuals who spent several months or years outside their country. Those with longer stays abroad often return with greater purchasing power, a set of skills acquired through work experience, and, in some cases, English proficiency. At the same time, they typically have weaker support networks in the country of return, which complicates their reintegration.

Data Sources on Returnees: Challenges and General Context

5. These figures do not match precisely those reported by the IOM or by national sources in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, because of differences in definitions and sources. However, they are consistent in terms of their order of magnitude. These discrepancies are analyzed in chapter 4, "Return and Reintegration."

To put figures on returnees to NCA in context, Table 1 compares the number of returns from the United States and Mexico to 11 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). The number of returned migrants is calculated based on data reported by the countries that carry out deportations.⁵

The three NCA countries show the highest levels of return in the region when the number of returnees is assessed relative to each country's total population. One of this report's objectives is to identify regular data sources on returnees in the three NCA countries, compare them with other sources, and determine the main information gaps. While the report refers to certain stand-alone studies, its primary focus is on entities that maintain up-to-date data on this phenomenon and can therefore provide information for continuous monitoring of the challenges associated with return migration in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

The priority of this report is to compile and periodically update a list of the entities and organizations that publish relevant data that can be used on a regular basis. In general, these include government entities in both the countries of origin and destination that are responsible for managing migration flows, international organizations focused on migration, and the national statistics offices in the countries concerned. Academic research, often funded by these same actors, complements these sources.

Table 1. Migrants Returned by the United States and Mexico to LAC Countries (2021–2024)

Country of return	2022	2023	2024	Total 2022–2024	Returnees as a percentage of total population
Brazil	1,857	2,202	2,007	6,066	0
Colombia	5,117	10,452	15,623	31,192	0.06
Dominican Republic	1,675	4,393	3,023	9,091	0.08
Ecuador	3,232	8,126	12,560	23,918	0.13
El Salvador	11,512	10,209	15,640	37,361	0.59
Guatemala	51,571	45,340	76,895	173,806	0.96
Haiti*	1,563	881	800	3,244	0.03
Honduras	47,009	41,528	53,958	142,495	1.34
Mexico	33,832	54,056	87,298	175,186	0.14
Nicaragua	7,543	2,755	3,912	14,210	0.20
Venezuela	1,217	1,604	3,839	6,660	0.02

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from US Customs and Border Protection and the Mexican Ministry of Interior (SEGOB).

* Haiti receives large numbers of returnees from the Dominican Republic, who are not included here.

To guide the analysis, it is essential to define what constitutes successful reintegration and what criteria should be used to assess it. A recent report by the IDB, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) defines socioeconomic integration as “the eradication of differences between the outcomes for the migrant and native-born populations in the economy and society” (2023). This definition can also be applied to returnees: reintegration would then imply that the employment and income levels of this population are similar to those of people who never emigrated or attempted to emigrate. Measuring these gaps will require changes to the data collection mechanisms used by national statistics offices.

Toward a Broader Understanding of Reintegration

Chapter 1 of this report, “Measuring and Analyzing Return Migration Worldwide,” reviews the situation of returnees across the globe and provides some figures to situate NCA countries within a broader context. Chapter 2, “Central Americans Abroad,” identifies the available data on the diasporas of the three NCA countries and examines the reasons for emigration. Chapter 3, “Encounters, Detentions, and Deportations,” analyzes data sources on encounters, detention, and deportation of emigrants from NCA in the United States and Mexico, as well as asylum processes in these countries. Chapter 4, “Return and Reintegration,” focuses on how the data obtained during the reception of returnees in their countries of origin are produced and disseminated. Chapter 5, “Tools for Analyzing Returnee Populations in Their Countries of Origin,” reviews potential data sources on returnees in each country. Chapter 6, “Administrative Data that Include Returnees,” examines the possibility of obtaining data from administrative records generated by other government ministries and agencies that interact with returnees. The analysis concludes with Chapter 7, “Returnees: Institutional Frameworks in NCA Countries,” which summarizes the legal frameworks concerning returnees in each of the three countries. Finally, following the Conclusions, the Appendix provides links to all available data sources on return migration in NCA.

One of this report’s objectives is to identify regular data sources on returnees in the three NCA countries, compare them with other sources, and determine the main information gaps.

1. Measuring and Analyzing Return Migration Worldwide

Key Messages

Although forced return is just one form of return migration, it accounts for the largest volume of returnees and poses the greatest challenges for reintegration.

Forced return is a particular challenge for the three NCA countries.

The United States and Mexico return more migrants to NCA than the European Union returns globally, making it the world's largest forced return flow from north to south.

How is forced return defined relative to other types of return? Batistella (2018) offers a useful conceptual framework for understanding return migration by considering, first, whether migrants achieved the goals they had set for themselves and, second, whether their return is voluntary or forced (Table 2).

Table 2. Four Types of Return

Types of Return	Timing	
	PLAN COMPLETED	PLAN NOT COMPLETED
Voluntary	Quadrant 1 Goals achieved	Quadrant 2 Plan interrupted for personal reasons
Involuntary	Quadrant 3 Expiration of contract/permit	Quadrant 4 Deportation and/or denial of asylum application

Source: Authors' compilation based on Batistella (2018).

A significant share of returnees go back to their country of origin after a successful migration experience. This return may be voluntary, after achieving the goals they set for themselves (Quadrant 1). There are also situations in which, after a successful migration, return occurs involuntarily – for example, when a temporary permit expires (Quadrant 3). Much of the literature on return migration, especially outside LAC, focuses on the situations covered in these two quadrants.

Many migrants travel with the goal of eventually returning to their country of origin (Batistella, 2018). These individuals typically send remittances while abroad and save until they decide to return on their own (Quadrant 1). Others return earlier than

6. Several studies examine Mexican migration under the Bracero Program (1942–1964), for example, which allowed millions of people to enter the United States temporarily to address labor shortages. In Europe there have been, and continue to be, similar programs, especially for citizens of former colonies. These studies focus on the factors contributing to the success of returnees and their impact on development in their country of return.

7. Although Mexico has a larger returnee population, it represents a smaller share of the country's total population than is the case in NCA countries.

8. "Europe" refers to the 27 European Union countries plus the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries and the United Kingdom (33 countries in total), which are covered by Eurostat.

planned either because they are unable to achieve their goals within the time permitted under the policies governing their stay (Quadrant 3), or for personal reasons, such as finding that circumstances at the destination differ from their expectations or family issues (Quadrant 2). These cases are considered "normal" within broader migration dynamics and reflect conditions similar to those of other historical periods.⁶

Migrants who enter or remain in a destination country irregularly may be forced to return through proceedings initiated by the destination country (Quadrant 4). In LAC, the largest group within this category consists of people returned to NCA from the United States and Mexico.⁷

In the European context, reports by international organizations and the academic literature on return migration corresponding to the conditions of Quadrant 4 concentrate mainly on asylum seekers who must leave Europe after their asylum application is denied.⁸ Data published by Eurostat, the European statistical agency, classify returns into three categories: 1) assisted forced return, 2) assisted voluntary returns, and 3) non-assisted voluntary return. In practice, the first two categories largely correspond to what the IOM calls forced return, since assisted "voluntary" return mainly applies to people with an irregular status or whose asylum applications have been denied.

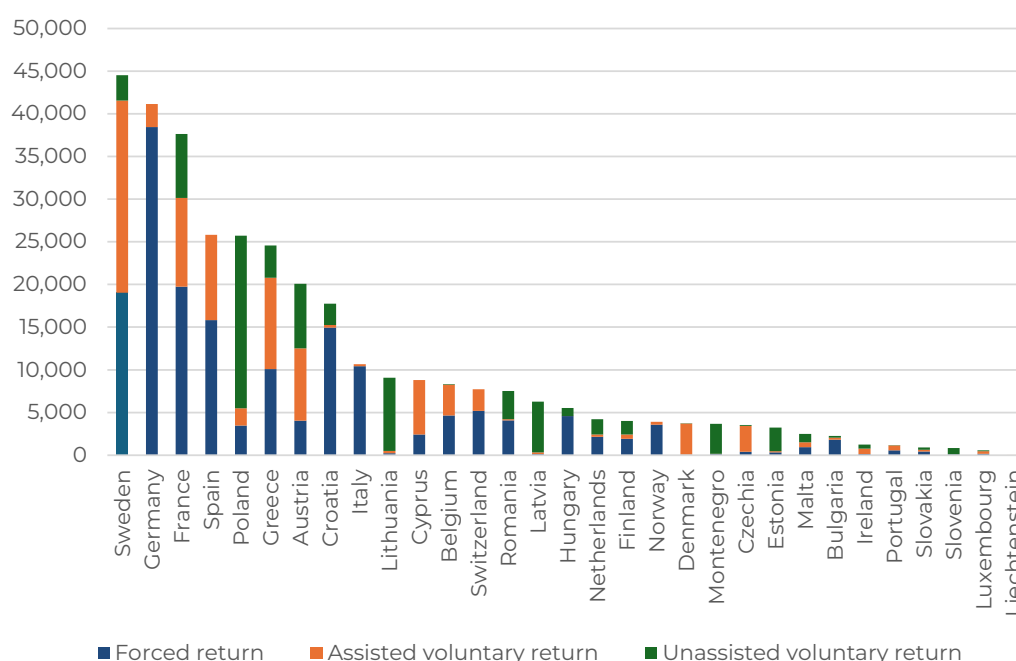


Figure 2. Number of Returnees from Europe (2020–2024)*

Source: Authors' calculations based on Eurostat data (see Appendix).

* Figures do not include returns within Europe.

Figures on returns from Europe confirm that forced returns to NCA are among the world's largest return flows. Figure 2, which covers a four-year period and includes voluntary returns, shows more than 336,000 returnees. By contrast, between 2020 and 2023, more than 608,000 people were forcibly returned to NCA from the United States and Mexico – 55% more than from Europe during the same period.

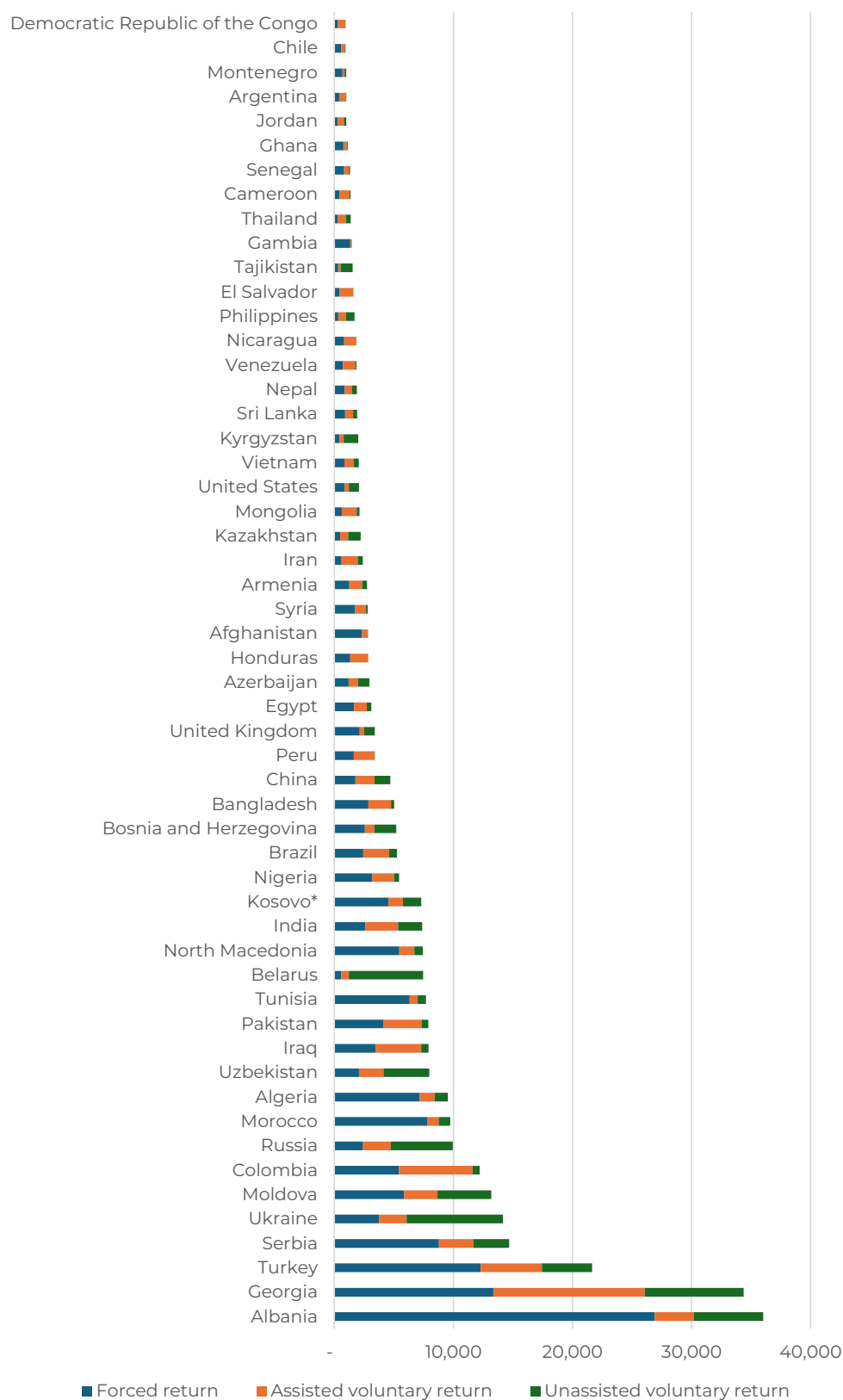


Figure 3. Returns from Europe by Type and Nationality (2020–2024)*

Source: Authors' calculations based on Eurostat data (see Appendix).

* Figures do not include returns within Europe.

9. In the absence of administrative data, the OECD uses household survey data that identify migrants and record their year of arrival to estimate the rate of out-migration after a given period of time. Thus, the data from the survey for year T can be used to estimate the number of immigrants who arrived in year T-1. Then, by taking the data from the same survey in year T+5, it is possible to calculate how many immigrants who arrived in year T-1 remained in the country. Although return is only one of several possible reasons for a decline in the indicator, it is a tool that makes it possible to capture the volume of migrant returns from OECD countries.

Return figures from the European Union cover nationals of 170 countries. Among the 45 countries that account for nearly 90% of returnees from Europe, only one (Honduras) is located in NCA, and just five others are in LAC (Colombia, Brazil, Peru, Venezuela, and Nicaragua).

In 2024, the OECD published a study on return, reintegration, and re-migration. It notes that administrative data on departures and returns are limited in OECD countries. While entries are closely monitored, exits – especially permanent departures – are much less systematically tracked. Moreover, countries that receive returnees either do not keep records of these entries or do not do so consistently.⁹

Between 2010 and 2019, among European OECD countries, the rate of out-migration after five years ranged from a high of 75% (the Netherlands) to a low of 26% (France). According to OECD data, the equivalent rate in the United States is around 15%. The OECD estimates that at least 300,000 migrants leave its member countries in Europe each year, while roughly 150,000 leave the United States annually. While these figures are based on changes in the resident migrant population, they do not incorporate precise data on departures and thus they do not capture the reasons or conditions of the return. In addition, the figures generally do not account for forced returns, since they are based on statistics for resident migrants and thus exclude people detained at the border and deported.

Table 3. Main Data Sources on Return Migration in Europe

Source	Type	Advantages	Limitations
Eurostat	International organization	Brings together return data from all European Union countries.	The data are disaggregated by type of return, but the definitions are not very clear.
OECD	International organization	OECD analysts are known for their rigorous analytical work, and the institution has the contacts and agreements needed to access a wide range of information.	No raw data are published, only reports summarizing findings. In addition, not all topics (for example, returnees) have a regular publication schedule.

Source: Authors’ compilation.

According to Eurostat data, in a period of slightly over four years, there were 353,000 returns from Europe, including voluntary returns. OECD estimates, by contrast, suggest that at least 300,000 people leave Europe each year. The discrepancy between these figures highlights the need for targeted studies and more precise data collection tools in various parts of the globe.

Having established that returns from the United States and Mexico to NCA countries rank among the world's largest forced return flows, the next chapter identifies and analyzes available data on emigrants from the three countries.

**Between 2020 and 2023,
more than 608,000 people
were forcibly returned to NCA
from the United States and
Mexico – 55% more than from
Europe during the same period.**

2. Central Americans Abroad

Key Messages

The population of the NCA diaspora is at a historic high, totaling almost 3.8 million people, most of whom live in the United States and Mexico.

Between 60% and 80% of emigrants from NCA arrived in the United States in the past 20 years.

The main drivers of emigration are economic, compounded by safety concerns and the desire for family reunification.

The ability to send remittances to family members in the country of origin is a key factor in the decision to emigrate. Remittances to NCA have grown steadily over the past 10 years.

2.1 Trends in the Diaspora

The number of people born in the three NCA countries and residing in the United States has risen continuously since 1990. In 2020, there were nearly 1.6 million Salvadoran emigrants living there. The emigrant populations from Guatemala and Honduras have also grown steadily over the past 30 years, reaching nearly 1.4 million in the case of Guatemala and 1 million in the case of Honduras.

According to data from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA, 2000), migrants from NCA have mainly moved to the United States. In 1990, 40% of Salvadoran emigrants and 70% of Guatemalan and Honduran emigrants were living in Mexico and the United States. By 2000, this share had risen above 90% for Salvadorans. Although the share of Guatemalans migrating to the United States grew more slowly, it also exceeded 90% by 2020. The share of Honduran emigrants in the United States reached 87% around 2005, then fell to about 79% in 2020.

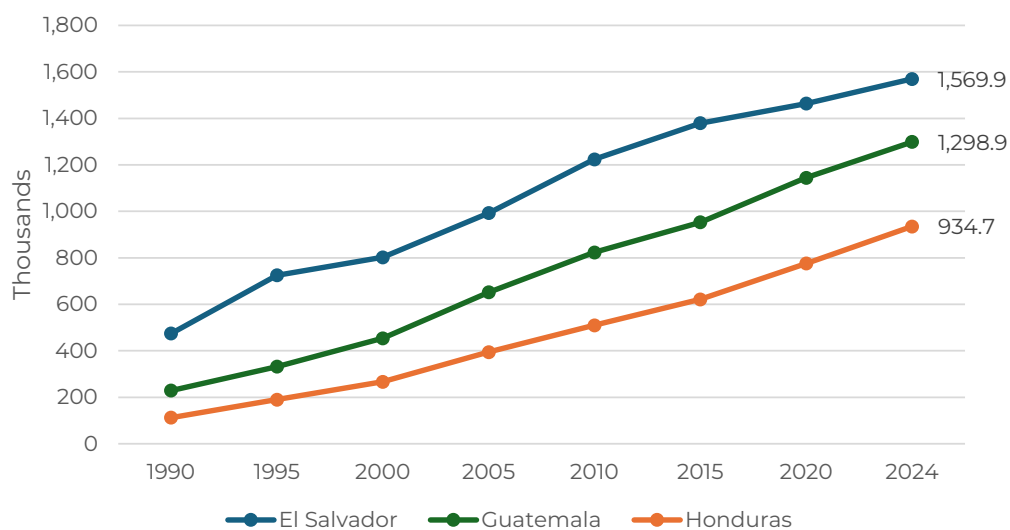


Figure 4. Trends of the NCA Migrant Population in the United States

Source: UNDESA (2024).

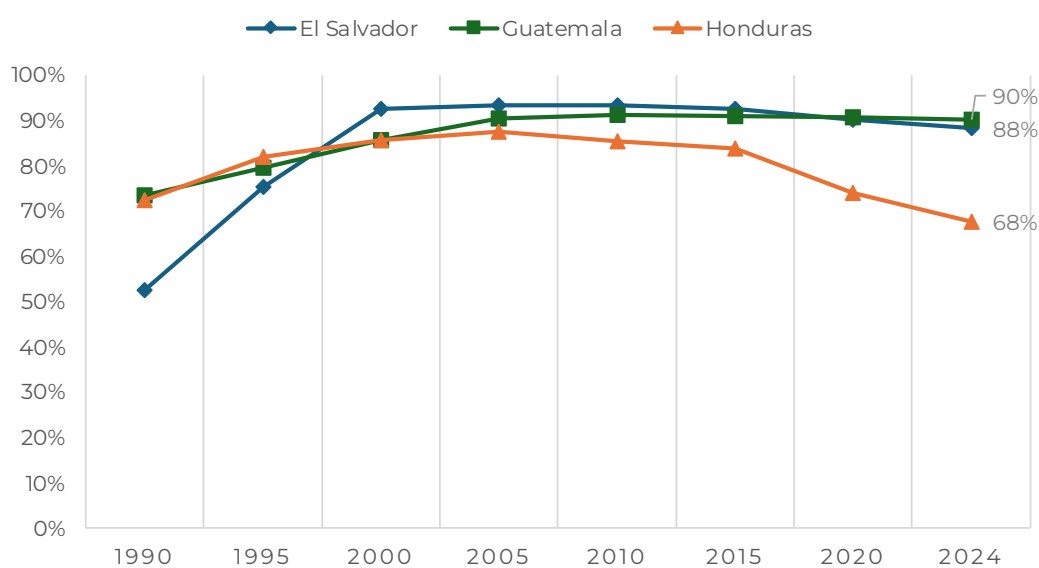


Figure 5. Share of Emigrants in the United States and Canada

Source: UNDESA (2024).

It is clear that citizens of NCA countries emigrate predominantly to the United States, where there are established communities of Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans.

10. Current Population Survey and the American Community Survey.

The household surveys conducted by the US Census Bureau represent another data source for estimating the size of the migrant population residing in the United States.¹⁰ Although these surveys are less precise than the census, which UNDESA relies on for its estimates, they offer an important advantage: they allow for annual estimates of the migrant population in the main destination country, making it possible to calculate net inflows and outflows. Although they do not capture the reasons people migrate, the surveys show that the number of migrants from NCA has grown since 2020, the second to last year covered by UNDESA data. This is very likely due to the rise in the Honduran and Guatemalan diasporas. The number of Salvadorans in the United States is similar to the level observed in 2018.

In 2024, the population of Guatemalans in the United States (1.54 million) surpassed that of Salvadorans (1.43 million). Over a six-year period, the number of Guatemalan migrants grew by nearly 700,000 people – a figure that only includes those born in Guatemala. During the same period, the number of Hondurans in the United States increased by 600,000. In total, between 2018 and 2024, the number of NCA-born residents in the United States rose by 1.3 million, following a decline of more than 100,000 people between 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting recession.

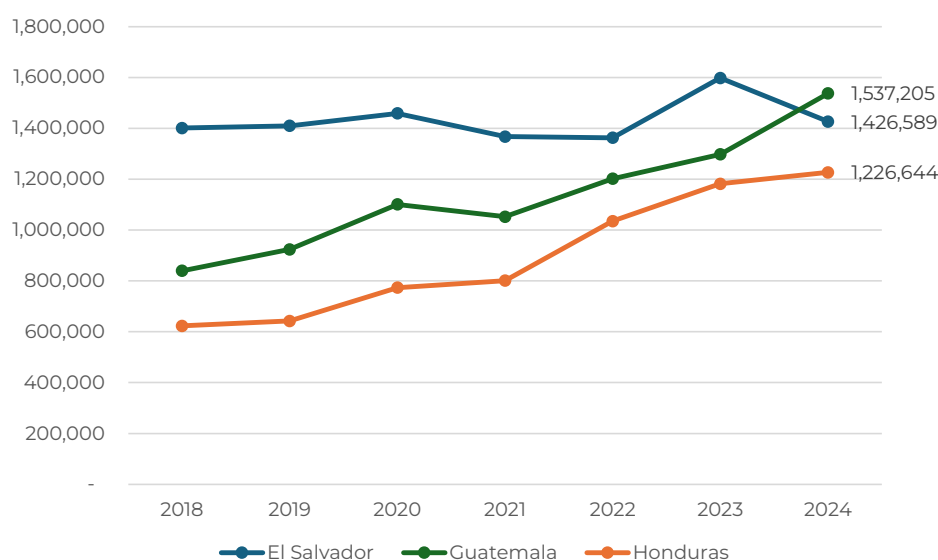


Figure 6. NCA-Born Population Living in the United States (2018–2024)

Source: Authors' calculations based on the Current Population Survey (see Appendix).

The data also show that more than half of migrants who were born in NCA and currently live in the United States arrived after 2000. Salvadorans tend to have longer stays: 39% of this group of migrants arrived before 2000. The equivalent share for Guatemalans is 27%, and for Hondurans, 18%. In short, between 60% and 80% of NCA emigrants currently in the United States arrived in the past 25 years.

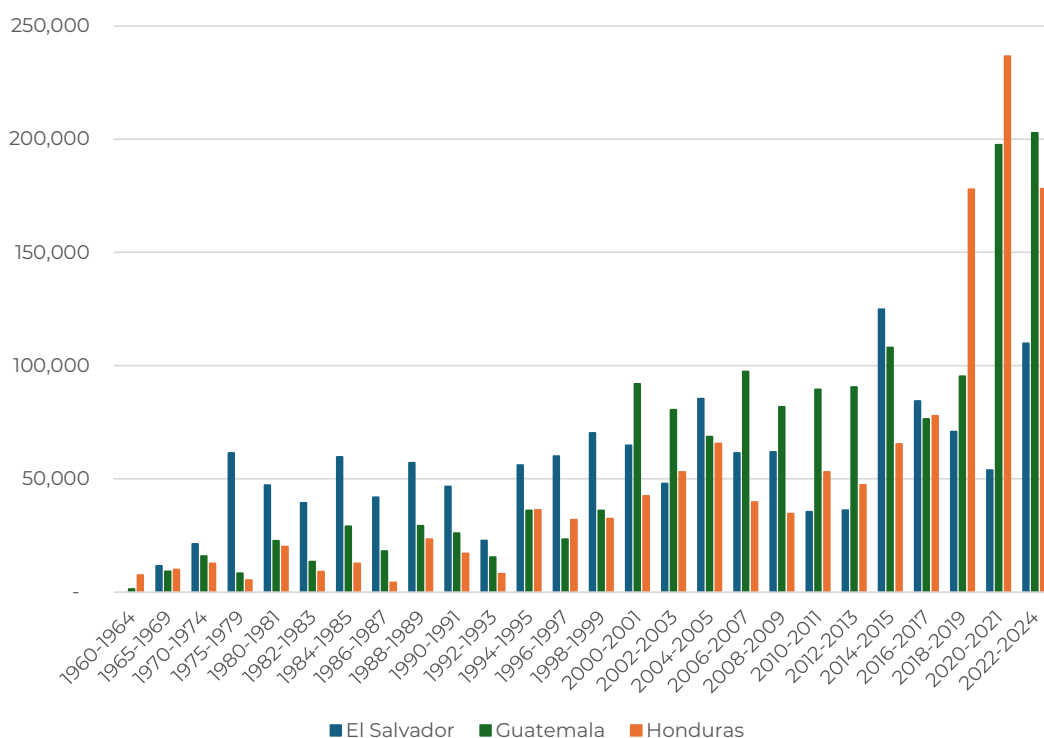


Figure 7. Number of NCA Migrants in the United States by Year of Arrival (reported in 2025)

Source: Authors' calculations based on the 2025 Current Population Survey (see Appendix).

Table 4. Comparison of Main Data Sources on NCA Migrants

Source	Advantages	Limitations
UNDESA	It is a comprehensive dataset on migrant populations by country of origin and destination.	It is based on census data, so updates are infrequent.
Censuses	The US and Mexican censuses provide information on the foreign-born population, allowing profiles of the diasporas living in these countries to be constructed.	Censuses are conducted only once every ten years and are therefore unsuitable for more frequent monitoring. In addition, they focus on residents, and data on people in transit are not captured.
Current Population Survey and American Community Survey	These US household surveys are updated almost continuously. Their large samples allow for relatively reliable coverage of the immigrant population.	As survey data, they are subject to sampling error. They are useful for tracking the Central American population residing in the United States, but not for measuring return migration.
Mexican Survey of Occupation and Employment (ENOE)	The ENOE is a household survey administered regularly in Mexico. It makes it possible to identify immigrants and compare them with the native-born population.	Migrants from NCA in transit to the United States are not represented in a meaningful way in Mexican surveys, since they are unlikely to have a fixed address.

Source: Authors' compilation.

2.2 Reasons for Emigration

The reasons for emigration can be captured at different stages. For example, during reception in the three NCA countries, returnees are asked some questions about their reasons for emigrating. In addition, surveys conducted by third parties – such as universities and international organizations – also gather this type of information. Meanwhile, although censuses and household surveys do not specifically identify returnees, they usually include questions about migration.

The reasons for emigration can be grouped into three main categories. Those related to safety include direct threats or dangerous situations arising from high crime rates. A second category is family reunification, that is, situations in which migrants have relatives abroad and are migrating to live with them. Finally, there are economic drivers, such as the search for better opportunities, debt, or unemployment.

Migration decisions are rarely driven by a single cause; most reflect a combination of several reasons. Economic reasons, for example, are almost always a factor. According to Honduras's Returned Migrant Attention System (SIAMIR), around 79% of returnees report having migrated for economic reasons. Some reports have shown that, in addition to security concerns, unemployment is one of the main drivers of migration worldwide (IOM, 2021a; World Refugee & Migration Council, 2021).

NCA countries are also particularly vulnerable to certain extreme climate events, such as droughts and hurricanes, that impact the livelihoods of millions of people and represent another factor driving migration. In fact, some of the migrant caravans that have formed since 2018, mobilizing thousands of Hondurans toward the Mexico–United States border, were triggered by droughts that severely affected the agricultural sector in recent years (IOM, 2019c).

2.3 Remittances

People who manage to settle abroad and find work typically begin sending remittances to family members in their countries of origin. Clemens and Ogden (2019) suggest that migration should be understood as a financial management strategy: location is an asset, and migration an investment. In other words, sending money home is one of the core objectives behind emigration, as the evidence regarding the three NCA countries makes clear. Harris, Maldonado, and Cortés Sánchez (2025) estimate that, in 2025, the LAC region as a whole received \$174.4 billion in remittances. Of this total, \$25.9 billion went to Guatemala, the hemisphere's second largest recipient; \$1.2 billion to Honduras, and \$10 billion to El Salvador. All three countries have seen sustained increases in remittances from abroad for more than 10 consecutive years (Figure 8).

Although remittances are not directly included in gross domestic product calculations, the goods and services purchased with them are, making remittances a key driver of national economies in NCA countries. Together with Nicaragua (27.6% of the GDP), NCA countries are among the four economies in the region where remittances represent the largest share of the GDP. In 2025, remittances received by Honduras were equivalent to 30.4% of GDP; in El Salvador, the figure was 27.3%; and in Guatemala, 21.4%. For comparison, in 2024 only Tonga (40.6%), Samoa (31.9%), and Tajikistan (48.2%) had substantially higher remittance-to-GDP ratios than NCA countries, while Lebanon (27.5%), Nepal (26.6%), and Gambia (26.3%) showed similar patterns (Consejo Nacional de Población, Fundación BBVA, and BBVA Research, 2024).

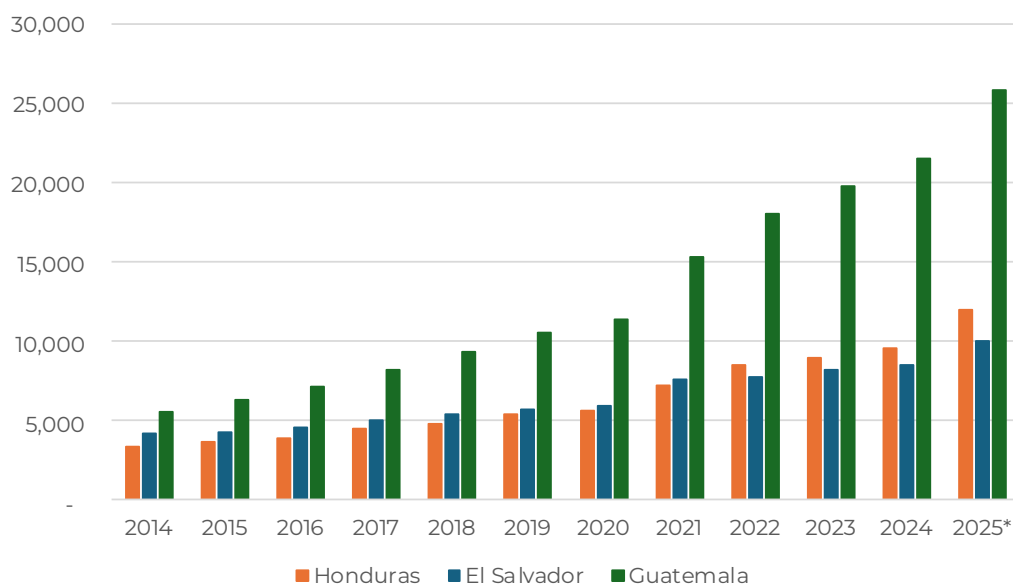


Figure 8. Trends in Annual Remittance Flows to NCA Countries (2014–2025)
(in millions of dollars)

Source: Harris, Maldonado, and Cortés Sánchez (2025).

* Projections.

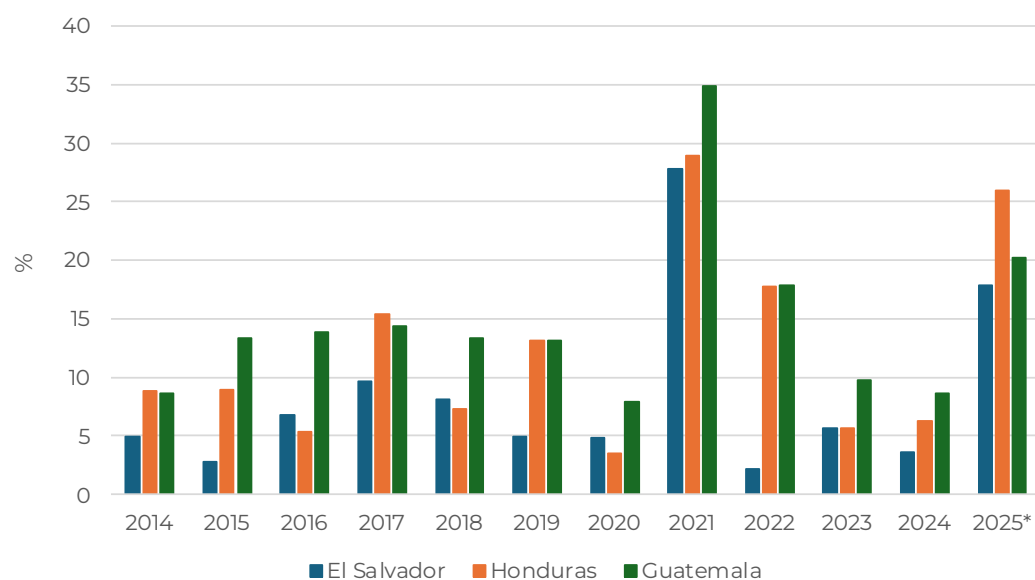


Figure 9. Annual Growth in Remittance Flows to NCA Countries

Source: Harris, Maldonado, and Cortés Sánchez (2025).

* Projections.

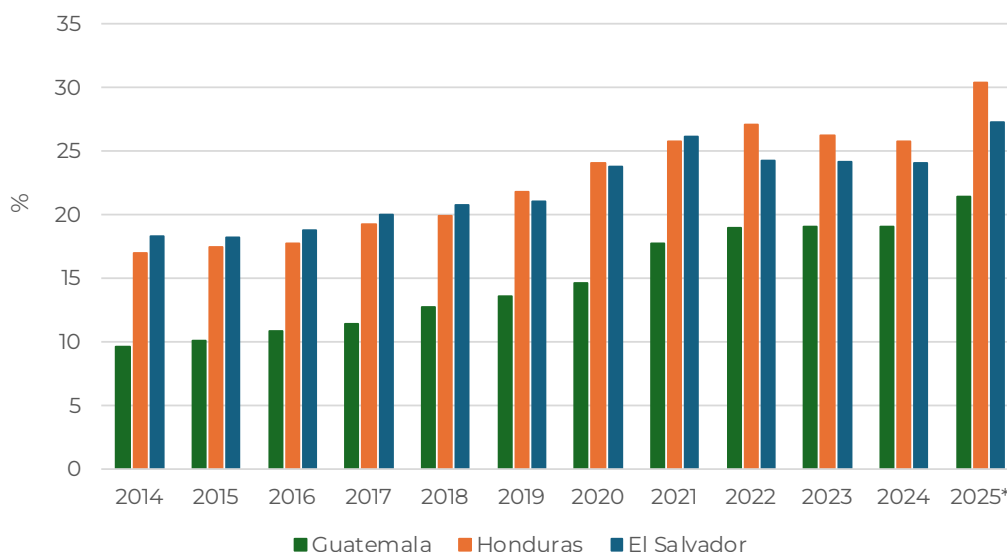


Figure 10. Remittances as a Share of GDP in NCA Countries

Source: Harris, Maldonado, and Cortés Sánchez (2025).

* Projections.

All three NCA countries have incorporated migration and remittance modules into their household surveys at various times and to varying degrees. Censuses have also included certain questions about family members living abroad and the receipt of remittances. A study by Balmore Enrique López Ramírez and Ricardo López concludes that “remittances have contributed to poverty reduction” in El Salvador and that “without them, 7.4% of households in relative poverty would have fallen into extreme poverty in 2022” (López Ramírez and López, 2023). The possibility of emigrating and earning enough to send remittances creates a strong incentive and, consequently, a risk factor for detention and involuntary return.

Available data on people born in NCA and residing abroad provide an approximate indication of the number of those who could eventually return – either forcibly or voluntarily – to their countries of origin. These data are useful, albeit provisionally, in helping to define a statistical universe. The next chapter presents the different data sources on people encountered, detained, and returned from the United States and Mexico, offering a clearer picture of forced return.

3. Encounters, Detentions, and Deportations

Key Messages

Encounters at the US southern border show that migrant return will remain a key challenge for NCA: although the share of migrants from the region has declined, they still account for more than 50% of recent deportations. Between 2014 and 2023, there were 3.6 million encounters at the border (33% of the total), and although Mexican nationals have historically led these figures, nationals of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador have consistently ranked next.

In addition to being a transit country that manages migration flows and returns, Mexico has also become a destination for a significant number of people seeking international protection.

Historically, applying for asylum in the United States has allowed migrants to remain for an average of four years while their case is processed. During this time, they can build resources and send remittances.

The United States has increased deportations of migrants with no criminal record, from 42% of deportations in 2015 to 80% in 2024. This shift affects public perceptions and the reintegration of returnees.

Even though the share of NCA nationals in overall border encounters has declined, migrants from the region have accounted for more than 50% of deportations in recent years.

During administrative and legal proceedings leading up to the return of NCA nationals – which include encounter, detention, processing, and eventual deportation – a range of data is collected that can shed light on the numbers and characteristics of returnees. People subjected to such proceedings may have been found crossing the border outside official ports of entry or may have been detained once in the country for a number of reasons, such as a document check or a traffic violation. Once someone is detained and while their case is being reviewed by migration authorities, administrative records are generated that can be used to produce useful statistics. During deportation, records containing even richer information are created.

3.1 United States

Most statistics on irregular migration that ends in return come from encounters with migrants seeking to cross the US southern border. Migrants who enter irregularly will often immediately seek out border officials to turn themselves in and request asylum, as a pending asylum claim prevents deportation. Although not everyone who has a border encounter passes the initial screening required to submit an asylum application, those who do can remain in the country for several years while their case is evaluated by immigration courts.

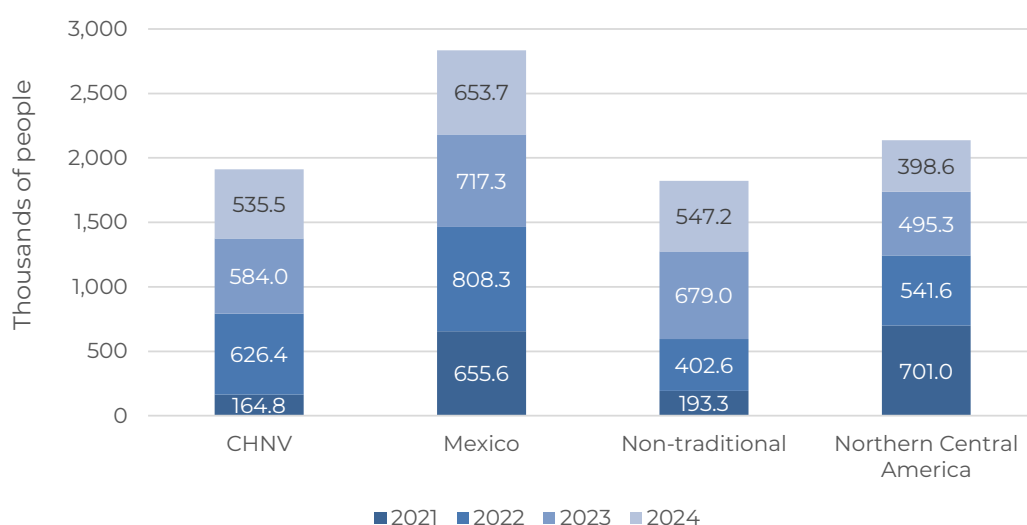


Figure 11. Encounters with Migrants at the US Southern Border, by Nationality (2021–2024)

Source: US Customs and Border Protection (CBP), data at the end of fiscal year 2024 (see Appendix).

3.1.1 Encounters at the US Southern Border

An analysis over a longer historical horizon reveals peaks of more than 1 million encounters per year in the 1980s and late 1990s. In those years, the vast majority of migrants encountered were Mexican, with numbers up to ten times higher than those for NCA nationals, while Honduran, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran nationals consistently ranked next.

Between 2014 and 2023, there were 3.6 million encounters with NCA citizens, representing 33% of all encounters: 14% for Guatemala, 13% for Honduras, and 6% for El Salvador. The most significant flows in this period occurred from 2018 onward, with the exception of 2020. In recent years, however, the share of NCA nationals in total encounters has fallen, while encounters with migrants from other origin countries – countries other than Mexico, NCA, Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, or Venezuela – have risen sharply.

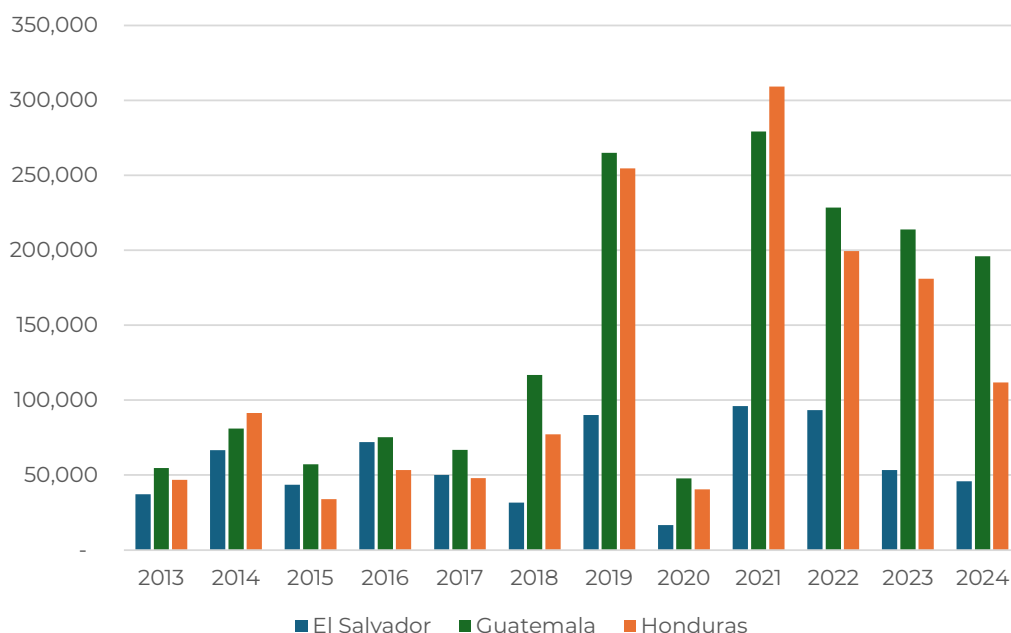


Figure 12. Trends in Number of Encounters at the US Southern Border with Migrants from NCA (2013–2024)

Source: Latest available data from the Office of Homeland Security Statistics (OHSS)¹¹ (see Appendix).

11. It should be noted that as of this report's publication date, OHSS had not published new data since January 2025 and it is unclear when this will occur again.

The number of encounters, of course, does not precisely reflect the total number of returnees. Some people encountered at the border are not immediately deported; they may apply for asylum and remain in the United States while their cases are reviewed. Others are apprehended after having lived in the United States for some time, often following some contact with the justice system that reveals their irregular status. Finally, some individuals attempt to cross multiple times and may account for more than one recorded encounter.

3.1.2 Recent Policy Developments at the US Southern Border

In response to the enormous migration flows of recent years, substantial changes have been made to US policies. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, new rules were introduced under Title 42 – the section of the United States Code dealing with public health – which allowed US authorities to detain and expel irregular migrants quickly. The order remained in effect until May 2023.

Before Title 42 expired, new legal pathways were created, especially for migrants from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. These require migrants to present themselves at designated points before reaching the border. If they have a sponsor who resides legally in the United States, they can apply to enter the country. These pathways are capped at 30,000 applications per month.

In January 2023, US authorities launched the CBP One mobile application, which allows migrants to schedule an appointment at the border to present their asylum claim. In doing so, they receive the same attention they would get if they entered the country irregularly, avoiding an encounter and detention – an approach that, in principle, should discourage irregular crossings. By mid-2023, the US government reported that 170,000 appointments had been processed through CBP One in the first six months it was available (DHS, 2024). By August 2024, nearly 530,000 people from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela had obtained immigration parole under this program. Although migrants have various options to extend their stay when their two-year parole expires – extensions, other visa types, temporary protected status, or asylum – there is no guarantee that these will be granted.

In mid-2024, new procedures were introduced for people encountered at the border. Officials stopped asking explicit questions to determine whether irregular migrants had a “credible fear” of persecution in their country of origin, which would make them eligible for asylum. Consequently, irregular border crossings declined, while more people opted for channels such as CBP One. In the first half of the fiscal year (October 2023 to March 2024) encounters had risen 12% relative to the same period a year earlier. In the second half, however, the number of encounters fell to 64% of the level recorded in the same months of 2023. This trend intensified in 2025: from February to May, there was an average of 11,000 encounters per month, compared with more than 200,000 per month in the same period in 2022 and more than 180,000 in 2024.

The US Detention and Deportation Process

- Migrants cross the US southern border and are detained by US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) or turn themselves in voluntarily.
- In general, they have the right to request asylum, which includes a preliminary interview.
- If they present sufficient evidence, they may remain in the United States while an immigration court processes their case and issues a final decision.
- In 2024, reforms to these procedures reduced the number of people able to request asylum.
- Some migrants, regardless of their immigration status, are detained within the United States for legal infractions, putting them at risk of deportation.
- These individuals also have the right to present their case before an immigration court prior to receiving a final removal order.
- Historically, US immigration courts have lacked sufficient capacity to handle the large volume of cases, which can take years to resolve.
- These delays can encourage irregular migration, since migrants know they can remain in the country while their case is pending.

3.2 Mexico

In Mexico, as opposed to “encountered migrants,” the National Institute of Migration (INM) refers to “persons in an irregular migration situation who are apprehended and referred to the authorities.” Historically, citizens of NCA countries have accounted for the vast majority of these cases. Numbers have risen over time, from 61,000 NCA nationals in 2011 to more than 230,000 in 2021. Although figures have fluctuated due to the pandemic and policy changes on both sides of the border, the number of people from NCA in an irregular situation in Mexico has trended upward overall over the past decade.

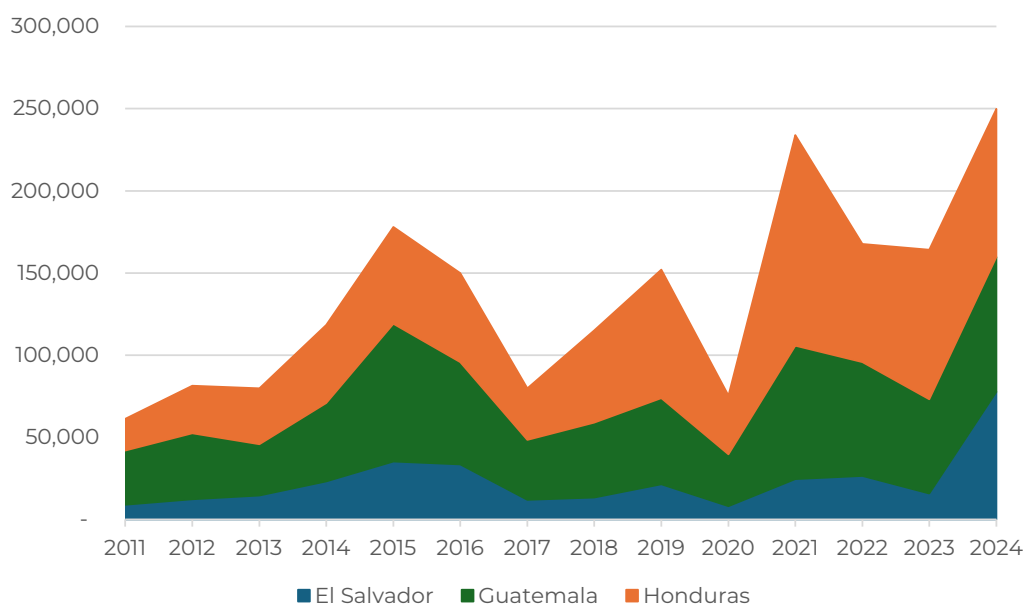


Figure 13. Encounters in Mexico with Irregular NCA Migrants (2011–2024)

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from Table 3.1.1 of the SEGOB Migration Policy Unit (UPM) (see Appendix).

Until 2020, around 90% of irregular migrants in Mexico were from NCA. In the post-pandemic years, migration flows from NCA have remained at historical levels. However, migrants from other countries have come to represent the majority of those detained. In 2023, irregular migrants from NCA represented less than 30% of the total, while the share of South American migrants rose considerably. According to SEGOB data, that year 222,000 Venezuelans with an irregular migration status were detained – twice as many as Hondurans (119,000) and almost three times as many as Guatemalans (81,000). In addition, more Ecuadorians (70,000), Cubans (27,000), Haitians (45,000), and Colombians (26,000) were detained than Salvadorans (24,000).

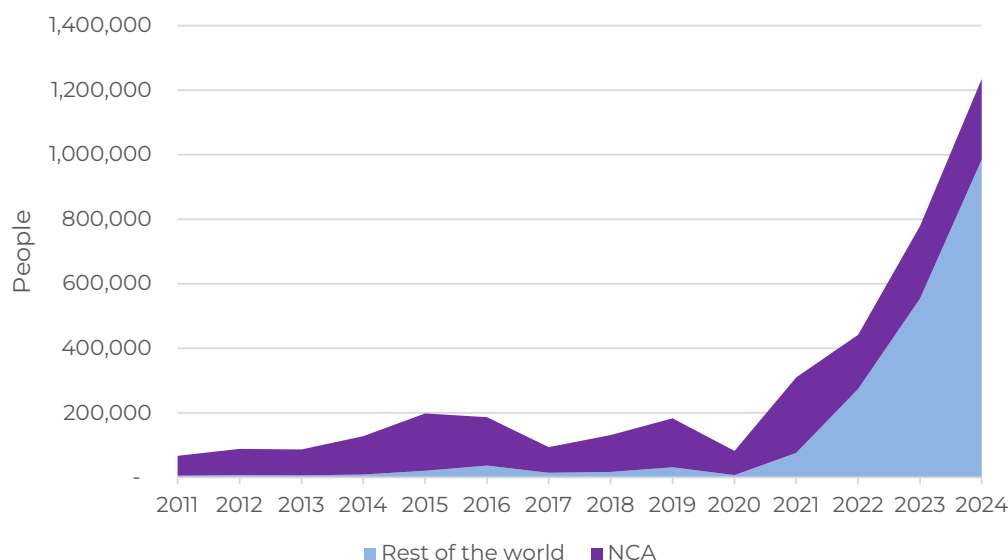


Figure 14. Encounters in Mexico with Irregular Migrants from NCA and Rest of World (2011–2024)

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from Table 3.1.1 of SEGOB/UPM (see Appendix).

3.3 Repeated Detentions

In general, the rate of repeat emigration is difficult to estimate. While neither the United States¹² nor Mexico releases data on the number of people subjected to repeated returns, other sources provide estimates. For example, available data for Honduras suggest that around 20% of migrants attempt to migrate twice, while between 60% and 70% will attempt it just once (Harris, Cortés, and Van der Werf, 2025).

Approximately one-third of returnees have emigrated more than once. Many first-time returnees also report that they plan to emigrate again.

Among returnees surveyed in the three NCA countries, 26.7% reported having been deported two to three times, and 3.9% said they had been returned more than three times. According to a study by Quinteros, Aguilar, and Rivera (2021), 50% of Honduran returnees planned to emigrate again, compared with 38% of Guatemalans and 16% of Salvadorans.

The United States does not provide a clear measure of repeated detentions in its published data. US Customs and Border Protection has released estimates of the share of people detained multiple times during a given month or year, but these records are not fully reliable. Although agency-level information systems can identify these individuals and this would in principle allow for a precise calculation, neither the CBP nor the OHSS provides this figure.

12. Current Population Survey and the American Community Survey.

In Mexico, in addition to monthly and annual statistical bulletins, the SEGOB publishes a database of individual events. Preliminary analyses of this database suggest that it is possible to obtain information on individuals who were detained and returned more than once in a single year. However, the code used to anonymize the data makes it difficult to measure this phenomenon.

Table 5. Comparison of Main Data Sources on Return Migrants in Mexico and the United States

Source	Advantages	Limitations
CPB	The CBP website has the most up-to-date information on encounters at the United States border.	It gives only the number of encounters, providing little information on the number of people apprehended or on how these individuals are processed.
OHSS (Estados Unidos)	The OHSS compiles and publishes data on a wide range of aspects of the enforcement of US immigration laws.	The data generally have a three-month lag. It also publishes standard statistical tables and does not provide access to disaggregated data.
SEGOB (México)	SEGOB publishes detailed monthly and annual statistical bulletins on encounters, processing, international protection, and deportation in Mexico.	The definitions used in its publications do not always align precisely with those of other data sources.

Source: Authors' compilation.

3.4 Refugee/Asylum Applications

While asylum applications do not guarantee that migrants will remain in the destination country, they do confer rights and significantly delay deportation.

3.4.1 The Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR)*

It is common for NCA emigrants who, for whatever reason, do not reach the US border to request refugee status in Mexico. COMAR¹³ is the Mexican authority that processes refugee applications in that country. Before 2018, COMAR received fewer than 10,000 applications per year from NCA citizens. Numbers then rose rapidly in 2018 and 2019, reaching 43,000 applications. After the COVID-19 pandemic, they continued to climb, with 54,000 applications filed in 2023. During the first 11 months of 2024, NCA nationals accounted for 24% of all refugee applications, with Honduran citizens representing approximately 8.6 percentage points.¹⁴

* Acronyms are given in their original Spanish form. See page 9 for a full list.

13. COMAR has not published new statistics since mid-2024. It is unclear whether it will resume publication.

14. COMAR report as of December 2024. Available at www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/960743/Cierre_Noviembre-2024_1-Dic.pdf.

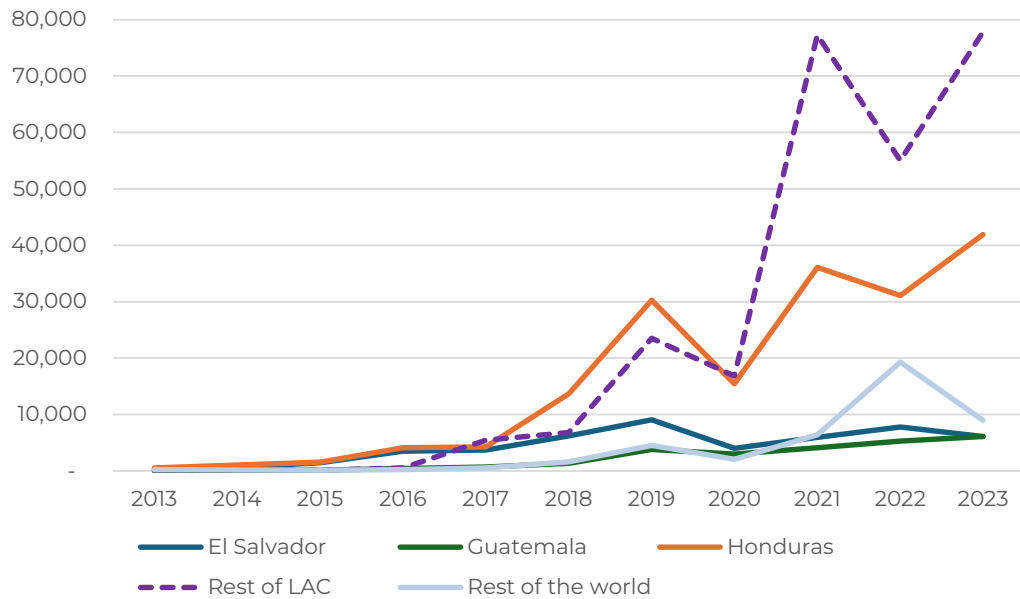


Figure 15. Number of Refugee Applications Filed with COMAR (2013–2023)

Source: Authors' calculations based on COMAR data.

When migrants apply for protection in Mexico, they can request a visitor card for humanitarian reasons from the INM, which allows them to work while their case is being processed. Filing a refugee application protects the applicant against deportation; according to available information, the COMAR may take between 45 and 100 working days to reach a decision (UNHCR, 2022). In practice, those who seek asylum in Mexico can remain in the country for an extended period while their case is being assessed.

Table 6. Recognition of Refugee Status in Mexico, by Nationality (2013–2024)

4.- RECONOCIDOS COMO REFUGIADOS, 2013 A 2024 (TOP 7)						
REFUGIADOS RECONOCIDOS, POR NACIONALIDAD TOTAL (2013 - 2024).						
PAÍS	RESUELTOS: Positivo, P.C. Negativo.	RECONOCIDOS POSITIVOS	OTORGADOS P.C.	NO RECONOCIDOS (Negativo)	PAÍS	POSITIVOS + P.C.
HONDURAS	81,911	64,808	2,861	14,242	HONDURAS	67,669
VENEZUELA	26,526	25,141	32	1,353	VENEZUELA	25,173
EL SALVADOR	25,900	17,649	2,655	5,596	EL SALVADOR	20,304
HAITI	22,395	3,790	4,093	14,512	CUBA	8,908
CUBA	15,888	8,127	781	6,980	HAITI	7,883
GUATEMALA	11,041	5,843	510	4,688	GUATEMALA	6,353
NICARAGUA	4,623	2,266	522	1,835	NICARAGUA	2,788
OTROS	8,453	2,496	805	5,152	OTROS	3,301
TOTAL	196,737	130,120	12,259	54,358	TOTAL	142,379

* El número de solicitudes, no necesariamente es el número de solicitudes en trámite, toda vez que puede haber anexiones o algunas de ellas se encuentran aún en prevención.

** Se debe tomar en cuenta que la oficina de Veracruz incluye además de ese estado a Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, Campeche y Yucatán, mientras que la oficina de la CDMX cubre, la CDMX y todas las entidades restantes con la excepción de las cubiertas por Veracruz, Chiapas, Tabasco, Baja California, Jalisco, Nuevo León y Saltillo.

*** Los datos presentados son preliminares, tienen carácter informativo y no son definitivos.

**** Solicitudes refiere al titular del procedimiento, más dependientes en caso de tenerlos. Solicitantes refiere a personas individuales.

P.C.= Protección Complementaria.

(Datos al cierre de Julio 2024)

Source: Latest COMAR report available (July 2024; see Appendix).

15. Note: applications from 2013–2021 are not included in the figure cited.

Between 2013 and 2022, Mexico made decisions on 196,737 applications for refugee status, of which 142,379 were approved. Between January 2022 and November 2024 alone, 333,120 applications were filed¹⁵; decisions are pending on at least 110,000 of these.

With UNHCR's support, SEGOB and COMAR have conducted multiple rounds of the Refugee Population Surveys (ENPORE) in Mexico: first in 2011, then in 2017. A new survey was administered in 2024, with results expected in 2025 (they were not yet available at the time this report was drafted).

The 2017 survey included several sections, including questions on basic information from refugees, such as their demographic characteristics, the reasons they left their country, and how they arrived in Mexico. Other sections addressed the legal process for being recognized as a refugee, their employment profile, their employment situation in Mexico, their income level, and their degree of financial inclusion. The social and cultural section covered housing, education, health, social relations, and perceptions of integration into Mexican society. Finally, respondents were asked about their plans to remain in their current place of residence and their expectations for the future.

Because the most recent ENPORE data currently available predate both the pandemic and the recent surge in emigration from NCA, the most relevant information on the recent experience of Central Americans – and especially those who may be returned in the future – will come from the 2024 survey.

16. After some interruptions in its updates, the system is now hosted at www.tracreports.org.

3.4.2 Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC)

Syracuse University's TRAC center compiles and publishes data on pending cases in US immigration courts.¹⁶ One of the main challenges facing the US migration system is the limited capacity of the courts to process so many applications: decisions can take years. Pending cases involving NCA nationals have increased significantly and there are currently more than 300,000 for Guatemalans and a similar number of Hondurans waiting for decisions. Pending cases for Salvadoran applicants peaked at nearly 190,000 in 2021 but have since fallen to below 140,000.



Figure 16. Pending Cases Involving NCA Nationals in US Immigration Courts (2012–2025)

Source: TRAC, updated to November 2025 (see Appendix).

TRAC also records the number of new asylum applications filed in the United States, but does not disaggregate this information by applicants' nationality, making it impossible to estimate what share corresponds to NCA nationals. In addition, the most recent TRAC data on this topic are from November 2022.

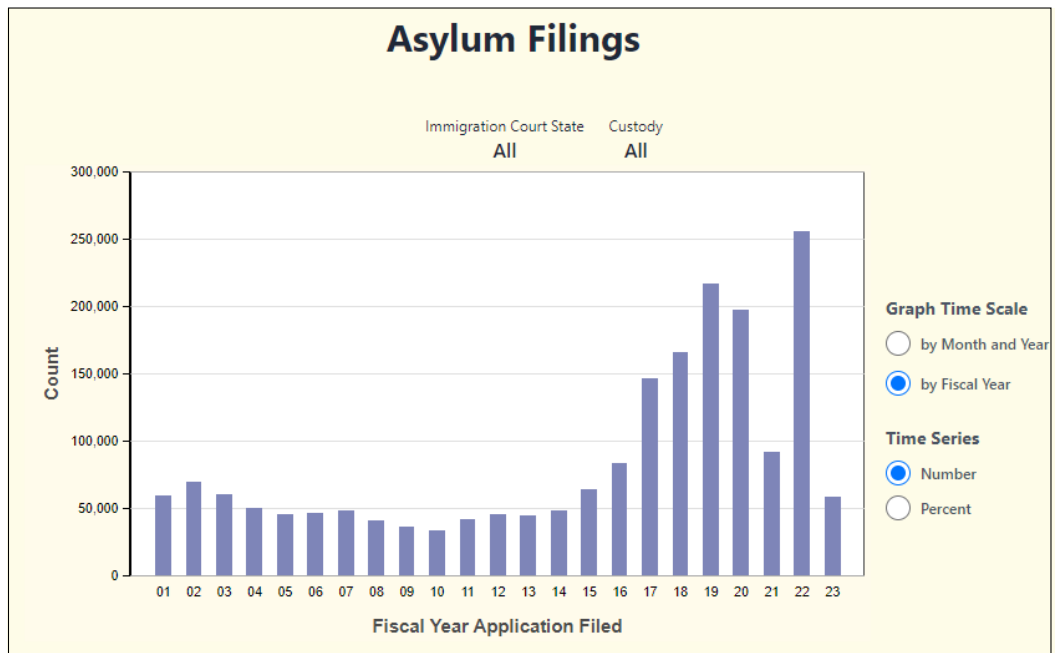


Figure 17. Number of Asylum Applications in the United States (2001–2023)

Source: TRAC, updated to November 2024 (see Appendix).

3.4.3 Asylum Data from the Office of Homeland Security Statistics (OHSS)

For asylum applications specifically, OHSS has begun publishing more detailed, disaggregated data. Between 2014 and 2022, the United States received 197,295 asylum applications from NCA nationals: 62,810 from Salvadorans, 83,089 from Guatemalans, and 51,396 from Hondurans. In 2014, fewer than 8,000 applications were filed by people from these three countries, nearly half of them by Guatemalans. Numbers then begin to rise sharply. By 2017, there were approximately 12,000 Guatemalan applicants, almost 12,000 Hondurans, and 7,000 Salvadorans. The OHSS has not published data beyond 2022.

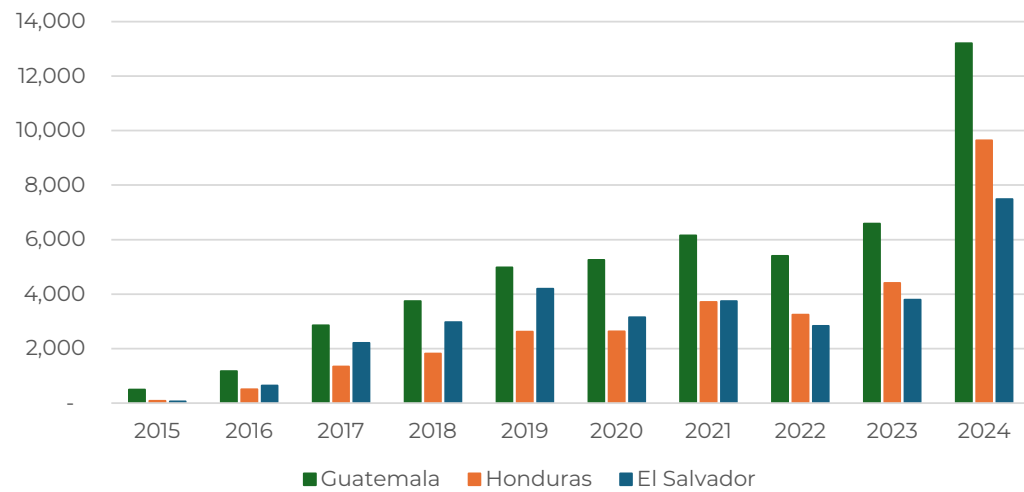


Figure 18. Number of Asylum Applications in the United States by NCA Nationals (2015–2024)

Source: Authors' calculations based on OHSS data (see Appendix).

Since the OHSS only publishes data from 2014 onward, these are not strictly comparable with those of TRAC. Nonetheless, certain conclusions can be drawn. Of the nearly 200,000 asylum applications submitted between 2014 and 2022, 94,576 remained pending as of April 4, 2023. In other words, 48% of those applications had not yet been decided.

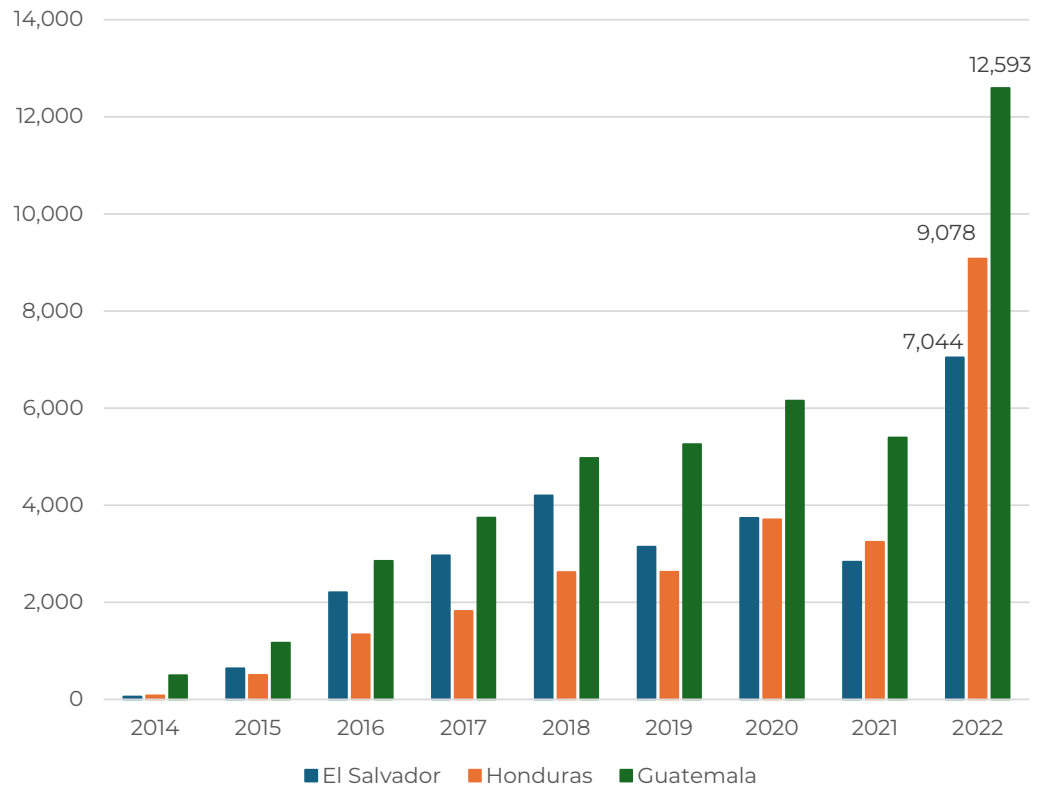


Figure 19. Number of Asylum Applications Pending in April 2023, by Year of Filing and Nationality (NCA)

Source: Authors' calculations based on OHSS data (see Appendix).

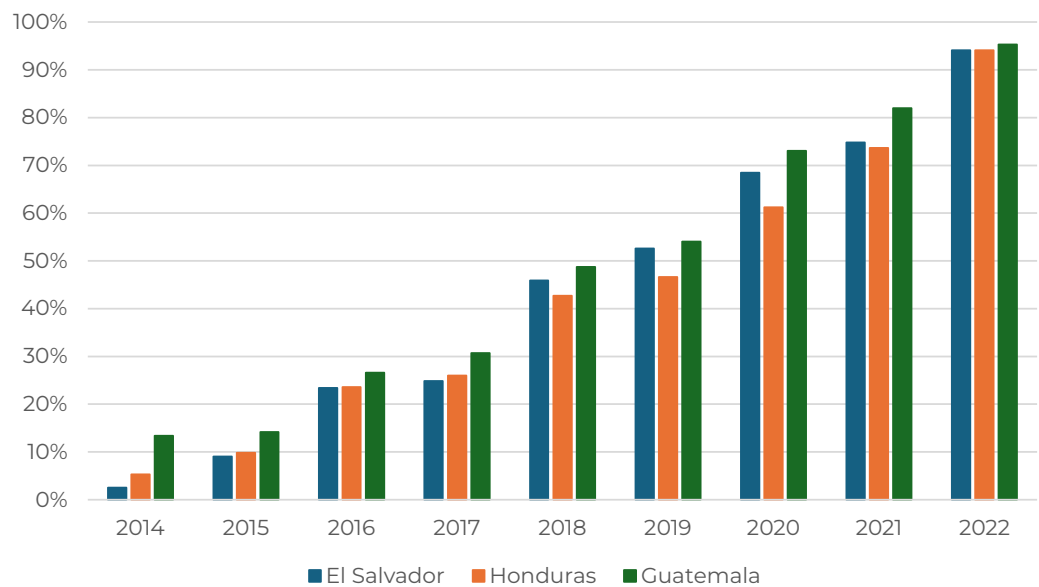


Figure 20. Percentage of Asylum Applications Pending in April 2023, by Year of Filing and Nationality (NCA)

Source: Authors' calculations based on OHSS data (see Appendix).

3.5 Deportations from the United States and Mexico

The data on deportations that countries publish are based on administrative records. They therefore reflect the legal steps and conditions for deportation, but generally do not include detailed demographic characteristics.

3.5.1 Deportations from the United States

In the United States, there are distinctions between which immigration enforcement agencies are responsible for removals and what types of violations (migration-related, criminal) justify deportation. The statistics available can be disaggregated by agency, type of infraction, and nationality of the person removed, though information on sex and age is not published.

A migrant who returns with no criminal record may still suffer discrimination due to the perception that all returnees are criminals. Although the OHSS provides a breakdown of deportations by type of infraction, it does not offer a filter that allows these statistics to be cross-referenced with deportees' nationality.

From 2014 to 2020, between 40% and 50% of all returnees had no criminal record. In 2021, this share fell to 34%, reflecting efforts to prioritize migrants with criminal records in deportation efforts. From that point onward, however, deportations of people with no criminal record increased. This period coincides with the implementation of Title 42, which allowed for expedited deportations on public health grounds. After the pandemic – and with Title 42 no longer in effect – the share of returnees without criminal records continued to rise rapidly, reaching 76% in fiscal year 2024, according to OHSS.



Figure 21. Percentage of People Deported from the United States without a Criminal Record (2014–2024)

Source: OHSS data (ICE ERO Removals by Criminality) through August 2024 (see Appendix).

Although published data do not currently allow for disaggregation by type of infraction and country of origin, it is highly likely that similar patterns apply across NCA countries. The OHSS has indicated that it is working on a more detailed breakdown of the data, which should be published in the coming months.

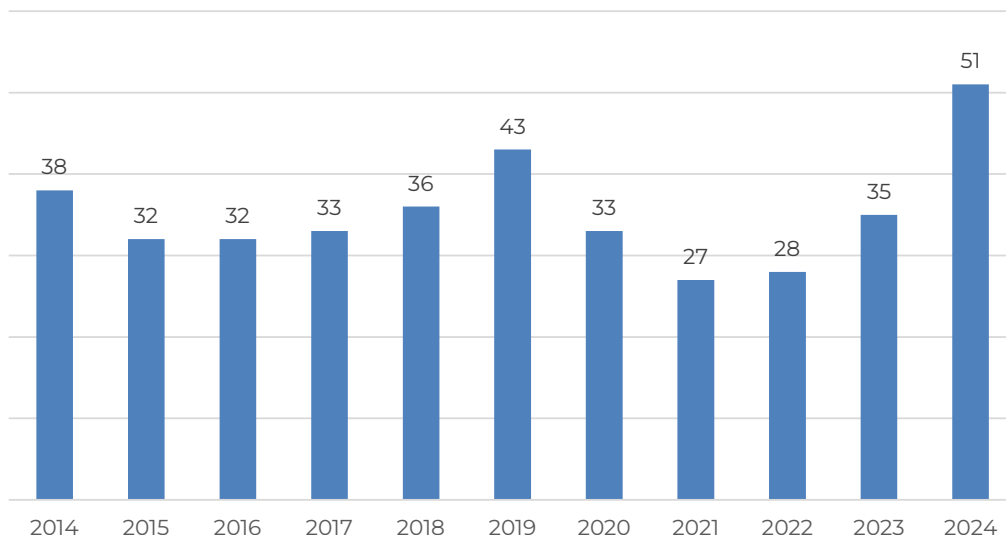


Figure 22. Percentage of Deportees Returned to NCA from the United States

Source: OHSS data through August 2024 (see Appendix).

The data also show that, in the years preceding the pandemic, deportees returned to NCA countries represented between 30% and 40% of all deportations, peaking at 43% in 2019. This figure fell to 36% between 2020 and 2021, but has risen rapidly in recent years. In the first months of 2024, 50% of deportees from the United States were returned to NCA.

3.5.2 Deportations from Mexico

Between 80% and 90% of people detained in Mexico with an irregular migration status are released on the condition that they leave the country on their own within 30 days. In practice, this arrangement makes the outcome of detention a voluntary return, rather than a forced one. If authorities encounter the person again after that period has elapsed, he or she is deported.

In recent years, most of this deportation flow has consisted of NCA nationals. In 2023, 145,000 of the 177,500 NCA nationals detained by Mexican authorities with an irregular migration status were ordered to leave the country within 30 days. These figures do not include 47,311 people who were deported following their detention. Numbers for the first seven months of 2024 are similar.

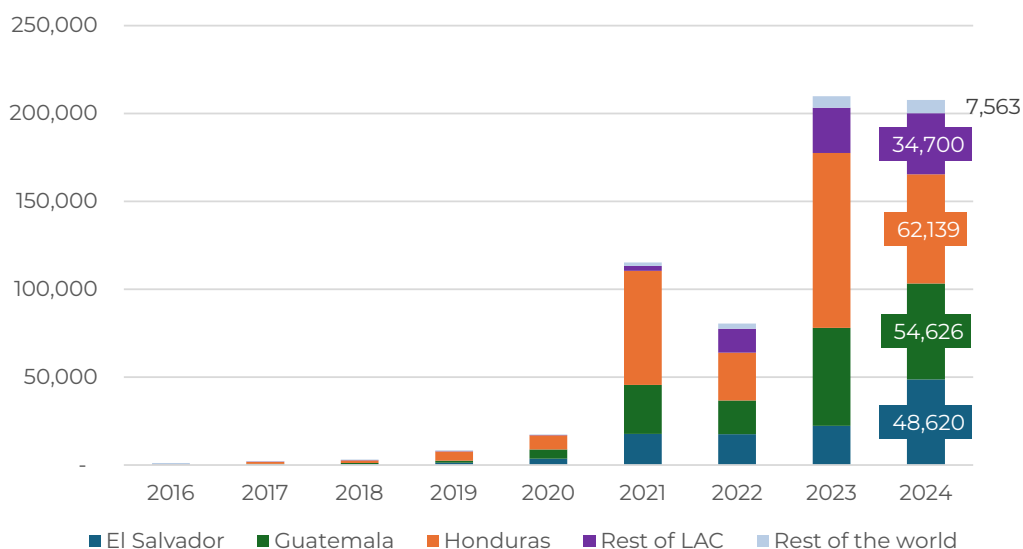


Figure 23. Foreign Nationals Detained in Mexico with an Irregular Migration Status and Not Subject to Return, by Nationality (2016–2024)

Source: SEGOB/UPM, cumulative data from Annual Statistical Bulletins, Table 3.2.9 (see Appendix).

17. These figures may be affected by sampling error and by the possibility that some individuals were counted more than once.

No data are available on how many of those who receive an order to leave actually exit the country. The published data do not indicate whether a person detained for having an irregular status had already been ordered to leave at the time of their detention.¹⁷

However, trends in forced returns from Mexico over the past 13 years show a largely cyclical pattern: every three to five years, a peak is followed by a period with significantly lower numbers. There is a similar cyclical pattern for all three NCA countries, which may be related to changes in multilateral or bilateral policies and varying levels of cooperation in managing regional migration flows.

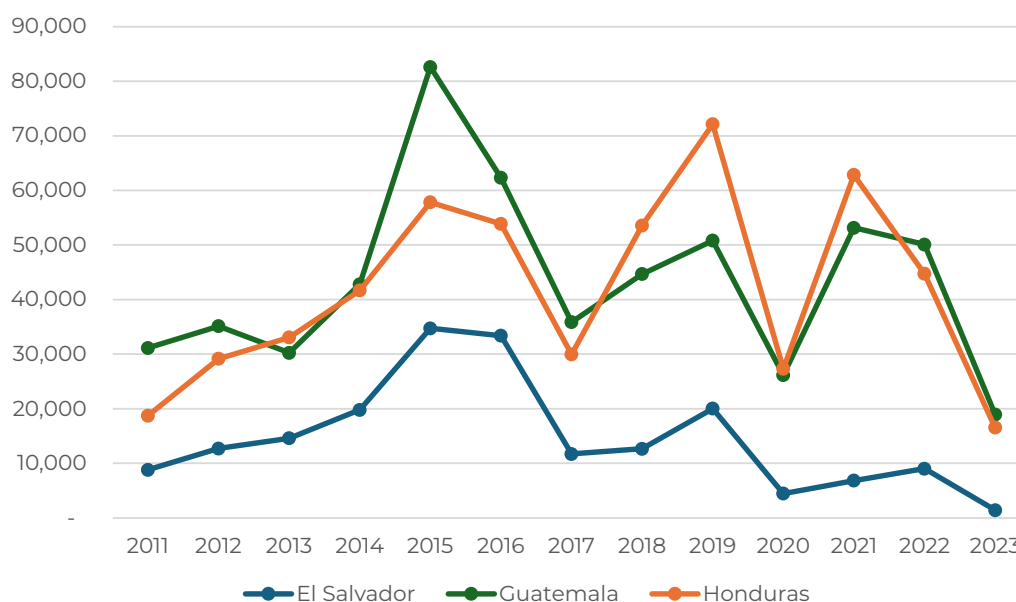


Figure 24. Number of NCA Nationals Returned by Mexican Authorities (2011–2023)*

Source: SEGOB/UPM, Annual Statistical Bulletins, Table 3.2.1 (see Appendix).

* The Mexican authorities use the term devueltos to refer to individuals who are returned to their countries.

Table 7. Comparison of Main Deportation Data Sources

Source	Advantages	Limitations
Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)	Publishes annual deportation figures by nationality in its annual report.	Publishes very little disaggregated data that provide insight into the underlying dynamics.
OHSS	Publishes data on a wide range of aspects of immigration law enforcement. The office is relatively new and is regularly expanding the information it provides.	It does not publish all the disaggregated data needed to cross-reference multiple variables (for example, criminal history and nationality).
SEGOB	The data it publishes are generated directly from administrative records, are up to date, and are publicly accessible.	Individuals are not uniquely identified in the data, so the same person may be counted multiple times.
TRAC	Obtains its data directly from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. It offers series on immigration court proceedings that are not available in any other database.	There are data lags and not all data can be accessed free of charge.

Source: Authors' compilation.

In principle, data generated during administrative processes in transit and destination countries cover the entire population of people forcibly returned. However, methodological differences, mismatched reporting periods, the range of definitions applied, and sampling errors make comparative analysis across sources challenging.

The next chapter examines the data sources associated with returnee reception processes and explores how they can be used to better understand the socioeconomic reintegration of returnees. It also proposes strategies for improving the information available.

Approximately one-third of returnees have emigrated more than once. Many first-time returnees also report that they plan to emigrate again.

4. Return and Reintegration

Key Messages

Returnees whose data were captured between 2017 and 2023 represent a significant share of their countries' populations: 2.2% of the population of El Salvador, 3.1% of that of Guatemala, and 4.5% of that of Honduras – 3.3% of NCA's combined population.

Figures on the total number of returnees draw on multiple sources, including the IOM, national institutions in the three NCA countries, and US and Mexican government agencies. Overall, these figures are broadly consistent, but the level of detail in data collected at reception varies across the three NCA countries.

Some international organizations and academic institutions collect additional information on returnees through surveys, but these tend to rely on small samples and are not conducted on a regular basis.

The most reliable information on returnees comes from administrative reception records, that is, the information collected immediately after people disembark from the transport used for their deportation. By contrast, information on their reintegration is much scarcer and therefore less reliable. This chapter presents and assesses, on the one hand, data sources from the reception of returnees and, on the other, sources that address reintegration processes.

4.1 Profile of Returned Migrants: Data Collected at Reception

The three NCA countries have robust procedures in place for receiving returned migrants. In the case of El Salvador and Honduras, which do not share a border with Mexico, almost all returnees arrive by air. They are received by government officials, who interview them to determine their immediate needs and offer different forms of support. In Guatemala, the process is similar, except that many returnees from Mexico arrive by land at border crossings. These individuals are also interviewed before officially reentering the country.

The main reception points for returnees include El Salvador International Airport and the Migrant Services Management Unit (GAMI) in El Salvador; the three main reception centers for returnees (CAMRs) in Belén, Omoa, and La Lima in Honduras; and La Aurora International Airport (Air Force Base) in Guatemala.

18. This information is available at <https://infounitnca.iom.int/en/c-a-north-returns/> (see Appendix).

In all cases, reception involves collecting data on returnees. While the specific variables recorded are not always identical, returnees are generally asked questions about their demographic characteristics and migration experiences. The IOM summarizes some of these data on its portal on NCA returnees.¹⁸

4.1.1 Honduras

The Honduran reception system, SIAMIR, is the most comprehensive in terms of the information it captures and later disseminates. Upon arriving, returnees are asked to provide information on their demographic characteristics (age, sex, marital status, etc.), family composition, reasons for migrating, health status and any disabilities, housing conditions in Honduras, educational attainment, and work experience.

The SIAMIR is managed by the Social Development Observatory (ODS) within the Honduran Secretariat of Social Development (SEDESOL). Information is collected to determine the services and policies that could prove useful to returnees during their reintegration, and the system allows other institutions to access information on returnees and in turn provide them with information on job opportunities, training, and other forms of support. To date, not enough information had been gathered to determine how systematically this follow-up is carried out.

19. The SIAMIR captures highly detailed data, including, for example, the municipality of birth, the place the individual was living before migrating, and their intended destination upon return. However, this information is not available in the public interface.

The current SIAMIR interface does not allow users to download full datasets, which limits the depth of possible analysis. However, the platform compiles a substantial volume of information, with more than 100 variable fields that provide rich data on returnees. Figure 25 illustrates, for example, how data can be disaggregated geographically.¹⁹

The SIAMIR is continuously being developed and expanded. The team managing it notes that they occasionally add new fields to capture information considered necessary and phase out variables deemed less useful. The team is currently working to add follow-up modules for returnees as part of projects supported by the IDB and other partners. In principle, this will make it possible to track returnees over time to monitor their reintegration, facilitate access to public services such as education and housing, and support reentry into the labor market.

AREA # 0101 LA CEIBA												
Mes de Ingreso	Año de Ingreso											
	Año 2014	Año 2015	Año 2016	Año 2017	Año 2018	Año 2019	Año 2020	Año 2021	Año 2022	Año 2023	Año 2024	Total
Enero	-	75	84	165	145	176	194	42	52	84	131	1 148
Febrero	-	92	107	180	229	268	156	131	91	130	124	1 508
Marzo	1	65	118	145	217	278	84	127	88	155	103	1 381
Abril	-	73	108	104	206	392	67	100	90	54	99	1 293
Mayo	-	98	194	134	226	345	59	167	121	92	115	1 551
Junio	-	103	157	117	239	439	38	140	252	104	88	1 677
Julio	-	127	201	150	164	335	53	136	259	73	108	1 606
Agosto	-	118	219	140	196	187	53	147	175	146	86	1 467
Septiembre	98	119	216	136	228	202	109	123	128	100	-	1 459
Octubre	121	143	214	125	370	167	134	186	125	127	-	1 712
Noviembre	103	128	234	193	236	169	34	213	149	167	-	1 626
Diciembre	87	144	200	111	157	113	29	230	118	115	-	1 304
Total	410	1 285	2 052	1 700	2 613	3 071	1 010	1 742	1 648	1 347	854	17 732

Figure 25. Example of SIAMIR Data: Number of Honduran Returnees with Destination of La Ceiba by Month and Year (2014–2024)

Source: SIAMIR (see Appendix).

4.1.2 Guatemala

The Guatemalan Migration Institute (IGM) is responsible for compiling and publishing data on returnees. Reception and surveys of adults returned by air from the United States take place at the Air Force Terminal in Guatemala City. The IGM surveys migrants and provides orientation during entry, while the National Council for Guatemalan Migrant Assistance (CONAMIGUA) offers initial reception services through eight offices across the country. The Secretariat of Social Welfare (SBS) is responsible for reception services for unaccompanied minors and for children returning with a single caregiver.

The Secretariat of Social Work of the Office of the First Lady (SOSEP) provides humanitarian support to returning families. During the second half of 2025, the Center for Assistance and Registration (CAR) opened in Guatemala City; it offers job placement, healthcare, psychosocial support, and legal assistance. Several agencies involved in the Plan Retorno al Hogar (Return Home Plan) have an on-site presence at the center to provide support to returnees.

The IGM has developed and published interactive dashboards with disaggregated statistics on returns on its website. These data exclude fields that could be used to identify specific individuals.²⁰ While this protects people's privacy, it limits the ability to determine how many people have been returned more than once.

20. Available at igm.gob.gt/informes-estadisticos/ (see Appendix).

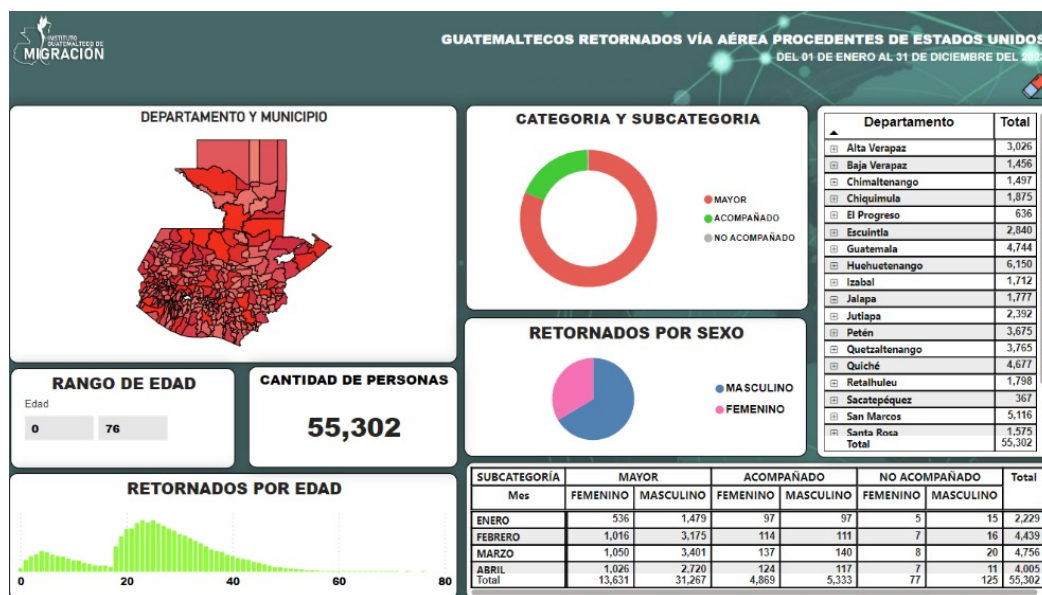


Figure 26. Example of IGM Dashboard Data

Source: IGM (see Appendix).

4.1.3 El Salvador

In El Salvador, the Office for Migration and Foreign Nationals (DGME), through its Migration Support Office (GAMI), is responsible for compiling most of the data. This entity interviews returnees upon arrival at the migrant reception center in La Chacra, San Salvador, using the National Migration Information System (SUNI), which was developed with support from the IOM. These data are for internal use. The DGME publishes information online, but generally only as total figures.

SALVADOREÑOS RETORNADOS POR PAÍS DE PROCEDENCIA

CUADRO COMPARATIVO DE ENERO A DICIEMBRE 2023 CON 2022

SALVADOREÑOS RETORNADOS	ENE-DIC 2022	ENE-DIC 2023
ESTADOS UNIDOS	8,905	11,614
MÉXICO	5,381	1,579
OTROS PAÍSES	156	165
TOTAL	14,442	13,358

Figure 27. Example of Public DGME Data

Source: DGME (see Appendix).

4.1.4 Information Compiled by the International Organization for Migration (IOM)

21. Available at: <https://infounitnca.iom.int/en/>.

With its long-standing presence in Central America, the IOM has built strong relationships with migration agencies in the region, signing agreements that allow it to receive their data directly. These relationships give the IOM a central role in receiving, analyzing, and disseminating data on returnees in the three NCA countries, a process complemented by its publication of these data on the Information Unit's NCA country portal.²¹

Although the IGM in Guatemala and the ODS in Honduras have their own portals for publishing data on returnees, the IOM website compiles information for all three countries and offers visual tools for comparing data across them. The IOM portal includes tools that allow users to analyze returnee data across the three countries, but it does not allow the microdata to be downloaded for independent analyses.

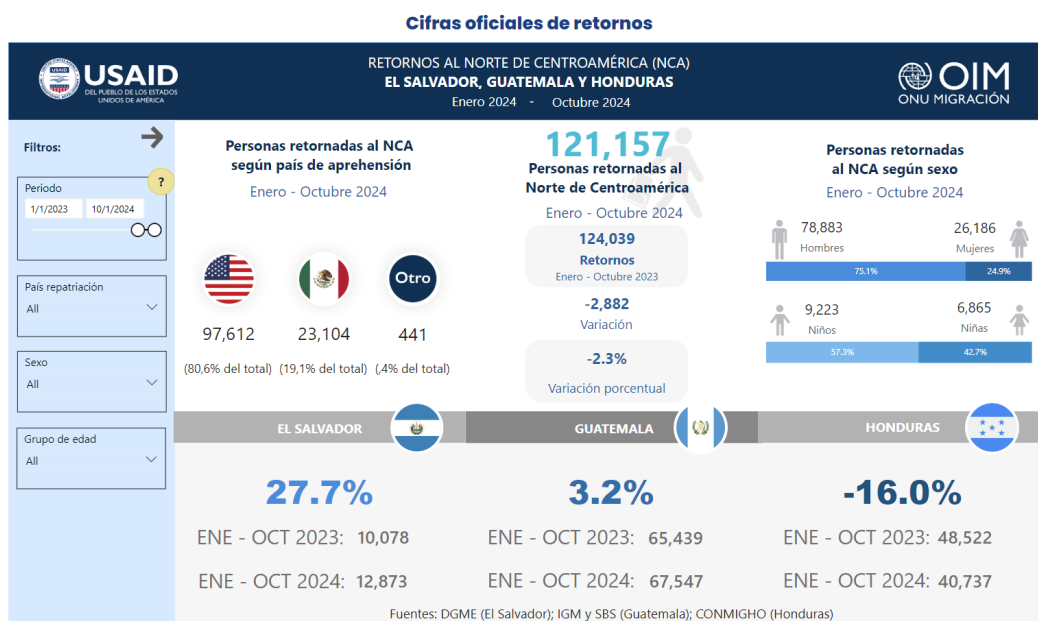


Figure 28. Example of Data from IOM's Information Unit Portal for NCA Countries

Source: IOM (see Appendix).

In late 2024, the IOM published *Sistematización de buenas prácticas y lecciones aprendidas en la gestión de centros de recepción de personas migrantes retornadas en El Salvador, Guatemala y Honduras* (Standardizing Good Practices and Lessons Learned in the Management of Reception Centers for Returnees in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) (IOM, 2024). The document places particular emphasis on information management and includes, for example, data collection templates for use during the reception of returnees. Looking ahead, it may be useful to establish standards regulating access to aggregated, anonymized data, in order to facilitate more granular analysis while ensuring full protection of personal data and compliance with applicable privacy regulations.

4.2 Figures on Returnees: Diverse Sources and Variations in Data

The three NCA countries are among the few in LAC that report statistics on returnees, and are the only ones besides Haiti for which the IOM compiles such information. Because of differences in coverage and inconsistent definitions, the IOM's figures do not fully align with those reported by the United States and Mexico.

Table 8. Returnees to NCA as a Share of the NCA Population (2017–2023)

	2017–2019	2018–2020	2019–2021	2020–2022	2021–2023
El Salvador	1.39%	1.14%	0.87%	0.52%	0.57%
Guatemala	1.48%	1.36%	1.20%	1.12%	1.32%
Honduras	2.31%	2.19%	1.97%	1.76%	1.91%

Source: Authors' calculations based on IOM data (see Appendix).

Within a single country, different agencies may report varying figures on returnees.

For El Salvador, as noted above, the DGME publishes its returnee statistics in collaboration with the IOM.

In Honduras, the Consular and Migration Observatory of Honduras (CONMIGHO) publishes statistics that draw on forms that their consulates send to the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (SRECI) – these are the same forms the IOM uses for its monitoring.²² In addition, the INM of Honduras publishes statistics applying broader coverage criteria, which include foreign nationals deported from Honduras, Hondurans who left the country intending to reside abroad and later returned for any reason, and foreign nationals who voluntarily chose to return to their countries of origin.²³ SEDESOL²⁴ manages the SIAMIR, which records returnees arriving at the CAMRs. The SIAMIR figures are consistent with those reported by CONMIGHO.

For Guatemala, the Guatemalan Migration Institute has published statistics on returnees²⁵ that broadly align with the numbers reported by the US Department of Homeland Security for the 2018–2021 period but are substantially higher for 2022–2023. Table 9 compares the main sources of data on returnees for the three countries.

22. These data are available at: infounitnca.iom.int/retornoshonduras/ (see Appendix).

23. These data are available at: inm.gob.hn/retornados.html (see Appendix).

24. These data are available at: ods.sedesol.gob.hn/siamir/ (see Appendix).

25. These data are available at: igm.gob.gt/guatemaltecos-retornados-2/ (see Appendix).

Table 9. Comparison of Data Sources on Returnees in the Three NCA Countries

El Salvador								
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2021–2023	Percentage of the population 2023
DHS+ SEGOB	28,111	39,020	17,040	9,712	11,512	10,209	31,433	0.50
IOM	26,479	37,316	10,840	8,481	14,437	13,357	36,275	0.57
DGME	26,837	37,348	10,716	9,152	14,442	13,358	36,952	0.58
Guatemala								
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2021–2023	Percentage of the population 2023
DHS+ SEGOB	95,070	105,713	55,939	60,934	51,571	45,340	157,845	0.88
IGM	94,482	105,512	45,572	63,520	94,216	79,697	237,433	1.32
IOM	94,306	105,277	45,885	63,808	94,202	79,979	237,989	1.32
Honduras								
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2021–2023	Percentage of the population 2023
DHS+ SEGOB	82,465	113,925	48,459	67,748	47,009	41,528	156,285	1.49
SIAMIR	73,831	98,343	34,358	60,782	60,064	54,332	175,178	1.67
INM	73,895	116,567	44,088	73,967	94,339	56,172	224,478	2.14
IOM	75,276	109,185	36,558	52,968	88,575	58,759	200,302	1.91

Source: Prepared by SCL/MIG based on data compiled from the respective sources.

In El Salvador, differences across sources are relatively small, primarily because the IOM is the only public source of detailed data, which draws on the information the DGME collects during reception.

Discrepancies between figures published by the United States and Mexico and those from the IOM may reflect omissions by migration authorities in those countries or, more likely, differences in how often statistics are updated.

In Guatemala, variations appear to be driven by the DHS's exclusion of certain return flights, which leads to an undercount on the US side. By contrast, IOM and IGM data are fully consistent.

In Honduras, differences are larger and the figures reported by the United States and Mexico are the lowest, perhaps reflecting an undercount of flights, as in Guatemala's case. This would explain the discrepancy with the SIAMIR data, as people are recorded at the point where return flights arrive and passengers disembark. The INM statistics include foreigners deported from Honduras but does not disaggregate the data in a way that allows national returnees to be counted. The IOM, for its part, relies on CONMIGHO data, but the observatory no longer publishes its datasets online. Because CONMIGHO data are based on lists received directly from the United States and Mexican governments of the individuals they are planning to deport, there is a risk of overcounting returnees – either because individuals of other nationalities appear on the lists, or because some people included on the lists may ultimately not be deported.

Since each institution's data originate at different stages of the deportation and reception process, some degree of discrepancy in the figures is inevitable. In general, the strongest options are: 1) combining DHS and SEGOB databases, which record the number of people boarding planes or buses for deportation, and 2) using data from reception centers, which capture the number of people disembarking from these transports. Other sources are further removed from the actual events and therefore subject to greater error.

4.3 Profile of Returned Migrants: Surveys upon Return

The key advantage of administrative data is that they capture the entire returnee population at the time of arrival. However, there are practical limits on how extensive questionnaires can be at a time that is stressful for returnees and logistically demanding for authorities, who must admit, process, and dispatch hundreds of people back to their communities of origin within limited time frames. Academic research and studies by international organizations seek to complement these data through surveys administered at different stages of the return and reintegration process.

4.3.1 Migration Surveys at Mexico's Borders (EMIF)

For roughly two decades, Mexico's Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF) has been conducting surveys of Mexican and NCA migrants who transit through Mexico. The EMIF surveys are carried out at the northern border with the United States (EMIF Norte) and the southern border with Guatemala (EMIF Sur). As part of EMIF Sur, interviews are conducted with people returned to Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. The survey of migrants returned by Mexican authorities captures nationality and demographic characteristics, reasons for emigration, intended final destination, schooling, the location and conditions of detention, and the number of times the person has been detained. Besides these questions, the people returned by US authorities are asked additional questions about the duration of their stay in the United States and their experience in transit through Mexico.

The EMIF surveys have been conducted for nearly 20 years, which allows recent results to be assessed within a broader historical context. Survey data show, for example, that in 2009, 53% of Guatemalan, 57% of Honduran, and 70% of Salvadoran returnees had spent more than one year in the United States, and roughly half of those had stayed more than five years. In 2019, those shares dropped sharply: among all returnees, only 15% of Guatemalans, 18% of Hondurans, and 22% of Salvadorans had been in the United States for five years or more.

This represents an important shift in returnees' experience. Given that recent returnees have spent less time abroad, many may not have had the opportunity to develop work-related skills, which often means they end up in the same kinds of jobs they did before emigrating.

EMIF Sur also includes questions about intentions to emigrate again. Among Guatemalan and Salvadoran respondents, between 2009 and 2019 roughly half of returnees said they planned to emigrate again, although the proportion giving an affirmative response shows a slight downward trend. For Honduran returnees, the share is even higher: about 65% indicated that they intended to leave the country again, a figure that rises for more recent years. The high likelihood of re-migration underscores the need for job reentry programs to be implemented quickly and effectively.

Flow of Central Americans Returned by US Immigration Authorities,
by Length of Stay in the US and Country of Origin,
2009, 2012, 2015–2019 (percentage)

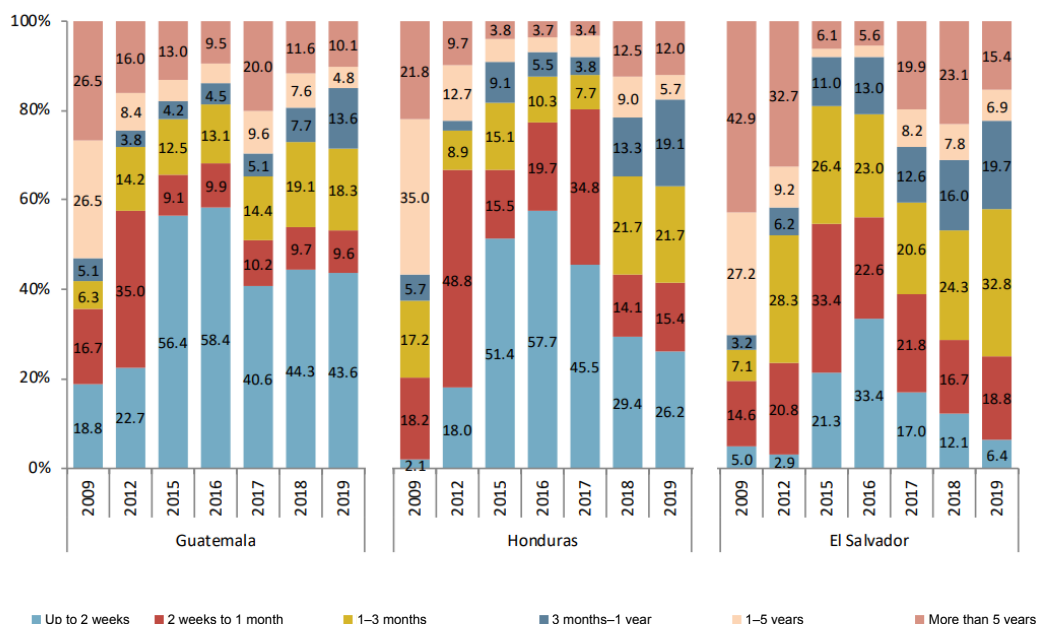


Figure 29. Length of Stay in the United States among NCA Returnees (2009–2019)

Source: EMIF Sur (see Appendix).

Flow of Central Americans Returned by US Immigration Authorities,
by with the intention of returning to the US and Country of Origin,
2009, 2012, 2015–2019 (percentage)

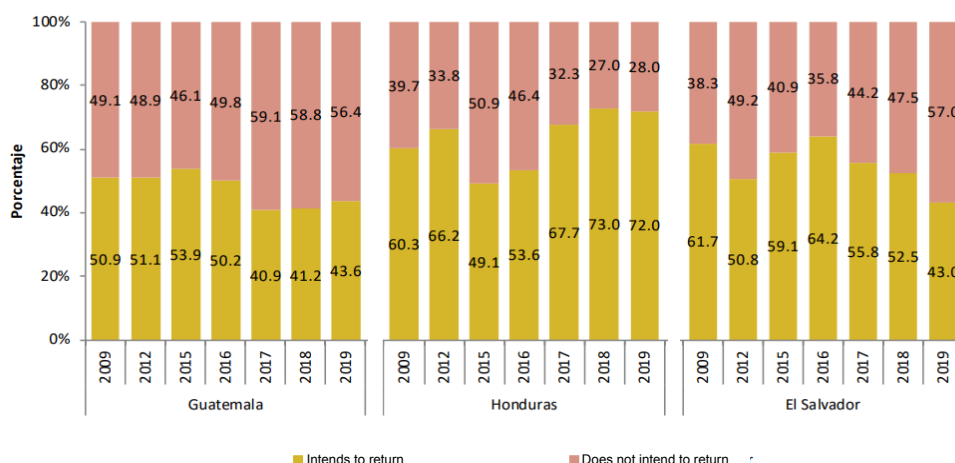


Figure 30. Intention to Re-Migrate to the United States (2009–2019)

Source: EMIF Sur (see Appendix).

The main limitations of the EMIF surveys relate to a lack of continuity in implementation. Due to resource constraints, in recent years COLEF has collected relatively small samples, which it publishes online. The most recent full annual report dates from 2019, and a review of the number of people surveyed from 2010 onward shows that the project's scale has gradually declined. In 2021, no surveys were conducted; in 2022, the sample included only one or two return flights arriving from the United States along with a few from Mexico, with most interviews conducted with Guatemalans and only 61 Salvadorans returned by Mexico.

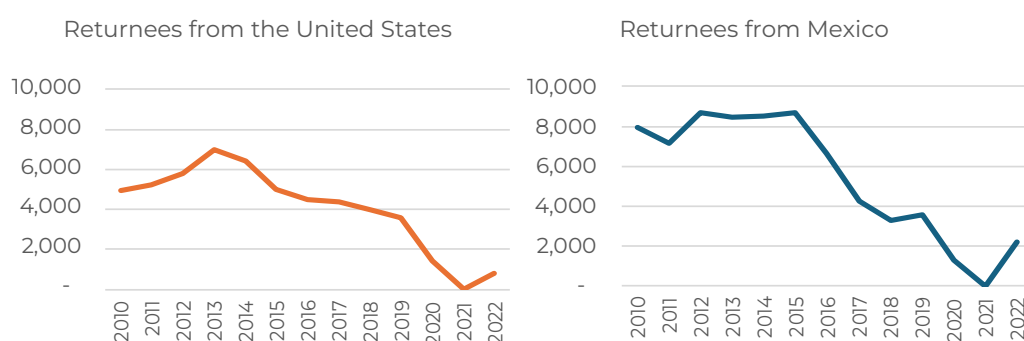


Figure 31. EMIF Sur Sample Sizes

Source: MIG calculations based on EMIF Sur data (see Appendix).

Small samples collected over short periods make it difficult to develop a robust profile of NCA returnees. For example, EMIF Sur data gathered in 2019 on the length of stay in the United States among returnees differ sharply from figures published only months later in the IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), as will be discussed below. While the COVID-19 pandemic may well have altered the demographic profile of NCA returnees, sample size differences may also create a bias in the statistics.

Beyond these issues, the SIAMIR in Honduras and the IGM in Guatemala already capture many of the variables included in the EMIF surveys. The latter, however, provides particular insight into migrants' experiences in transit through Mexico.

4.3.2 The IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM)

The IOM operates a displacement monitoring program in areas experiencing high migration flows using the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), which has been used to collect data on returnees in El Salvador and Guatemala.

In El Salvador, a 2020 survey of 480 returnees found that 52% had spent more than 10 years abroad (IOM, 2021b). The same year, in Guatemala a survey of 2,101 returnees found that only 25% had been abroad for a similar period (IOM, 2020a). While there is no directly comparable survey for Honduras, existing evidence suggests that the percentage there may be even lower (Quinteros, Aguilar, and Rivera, 2021). One possible explanation for this difference is that Salvadoran migrants have a larger and more established community in the United States, which may increase their likelihood of staying longer.

In addition to length of stay abroad, DTM collects data on demographics (sex and age), stated reasons for emigration, future migration intentions, education, and work experience. All of these variables are useful for designing reintegration policies.

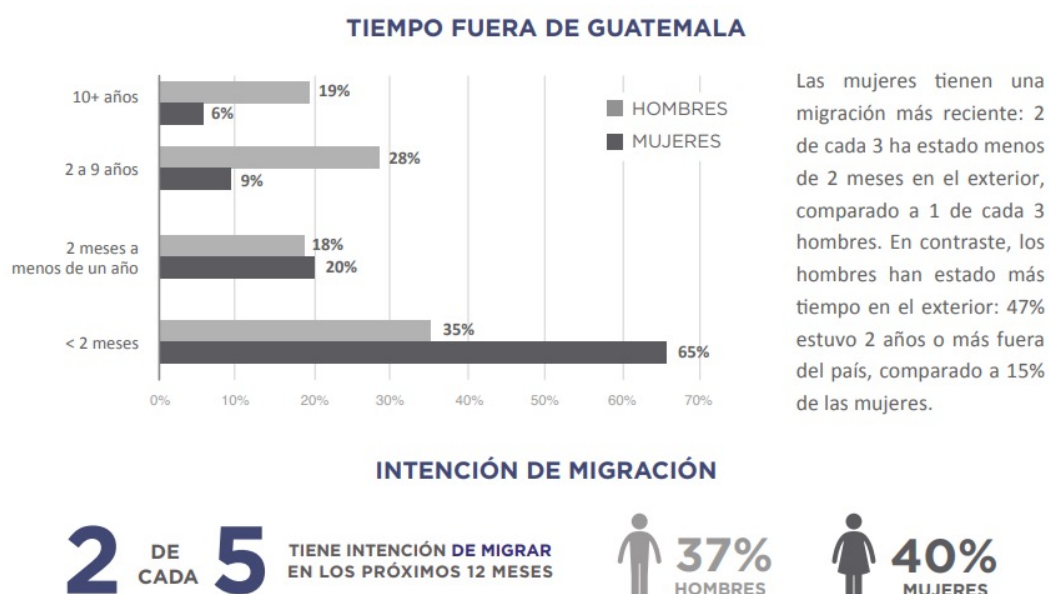


Figure 32. Example of DTM Data: Length of Stay Abroad among Returnees to Guatemala

Source: Encuesta de la población migrante retornada en Guatemala en el marco del COVID-19 [Survey of Migrant Returnees in Guatemala during COVID-19] (IOM, 2020a).

Despite its advantages for measuring migration flows, the DTM is implemented at specific points in time and over limited periods, so it is not well suited as the sole instrument for characterizing a population over the long term. Because DTM surveys often rely on limited samples or focus on strategic locations, their results are not representative of the full returnee population. However, when data are scarce during an emergency, the DTM can provide valuable information to guide key actors.

Table 10. Comparison of Main Surveys Administered upon Return

Source	Advantages	Limitations
OIM's DTM	Applies a methodology that makes the data comparable with other DTM exercises.	Not conducted regularly; not necessarily representative of the entire returnee population.
EMIF	Focused on migrants' experience in Mexico, which other sources do not capture.	Sample sizes have declined over time, limiting their representativeness. Limited added value compared with official data.

Source: Authors' compilation.

Overall, despite potential biases and continuity challenges, the SIAMIR in Honduras and the IGM in Guatemala capture information that is broadly comparable to the EMIF and the DTM, with the advantage of covering nearly the entire population of returnees. While the EMIF provides unique data on transit through Mexico, and the IOM's DTM facilitates the wide dissemination of findings, additional information is needed to promote the reintegration of returnees in NCA.

The next chapter examines data sources on returnees after the initial reception, with a particular focus on available information on socioeconomic reintegration.

5. Tools for Analyzing Returnee Populations in Their Countries of Origin

Key Messages

Sixteen percent of Hondurans, 13% of Salvadorans, and 7% of Guatemalans report having emigrated at least once.

Among this group, 10% of Guatemalans and 26% of Hondurans report having been deported after reaching their destination.

Censuses and household surveys in the three NCA countries offer an opportunity to generate better information on returnees.

There are no official statistics that allow for an in-depth analysis of the reintegration process.

Harmonization of survey methodologies across NCA would facilitate comparative analysis and data integration.

It is important to be able to measure and describe the stock of returnees – that is, the resident population that has emigrated and subsequently returned. Unlike monitoring and profiling during the return process, which measure returnee flows, assessing the stock of returnees requires statistical instruments with sufficient coverage to ensure nationally representative data. This task generally falls to national statistical agencies, which conduct population censuses and surveys.

A question on the census to identify returnees would prove extremely useful in all three NCA countries. Although these instruments have questions about family members living abroad, they do not include enough questions on migration experiences. In addition, because censuses are conducted only once every 10 years, they do not allow for continuous monitoring of the population and therefore do not provide the timely data needed to inform public policy design and decision-making. Household surveys, meanwhile, are not usually designed to identify and characterize returnees. This gap could be addressed by including some questions on migration. In recent years, researchers have developed methodological approaches that could be used for this purpose.

5.1 Censuses

In NCA, Honduras is in the process of conducting a new census in 2025–2026, while El Salvador released data from its 2023 census at the end of 2024, and Guatemala completed its most recent census in 2018. Censuses address migration in a way similar to household surveys, typically through a question about respondents' place of residence five years earlier. This indicator is adequate for populations where migration is relatively rare, but it is insufficient in NCA countries, where migration is far more prevalent.

The censuses in all three countries ask whether there are former household members who have emigrated and “have not yet returned.” The census currently underway in Honduras also includes a question about people who left and never reached their destination or whose whereabouts are unknown. Even so, it is impossible to identify returnees unless they returned exactly five years prior to the census date.

From a strategic perspective, including questions that more clearly identify returnees in censuses is crucial in the long term. In the medium term, however, efforts should focus on statistical instruments that are carried out more frequently.

5.2 Household and Labor Force Surveys

Data gathered through surveys at the reception stage are particularly important for designing policies that promote reintegration and mitigate the risk of re-migration. These data capture the skills and capacities of returnees, as well as the places where they intend to settle and will therefore need support. However, such surveys focus only on recent returnees and provide no insight into the longer-term outcomes of past policies and interventions.

This evidence base would be significantly strengthened if national surveys explicitly identified people who have emigrated, allowing returnees to be compared with those who have never had this experience. Household surveys – or, alternatively, labor force surveys – could provide valuable information on employment, wages, health, and housing, among other dimensions, if returnees could be identified. This would make it possible to assess the impact of existing labor market reintegration policies and evaluate whether they have encouraged returnees to remain in their countries. Subgroups of returnees with specific needs could also be identified with these instruments.

In El Salvador, the Department of Statistics and Censuses (DIGESTYC) previously served as the official census authority. These responsibilities have now been transferred to the National Office of Statistics and Censuses (ONEC), under the Central Reserve Bank, which also administers the annual Multipurpose Household Survey (EHPM). The most recent census is from 2024, with results released at the end of 2025.

The Honduran National Institute of Statistics (INE) conducts the country's census as well as the annual Permanent Multipurpose Household Survey (EPHPM). The most recent published census in Honduras is from 2013, and a new census is planned for 2026.

The Guatemalan Institute of Statistics (INE) conducted the country's most recent census in 2018 and also administers the National Survey of Employment and Income (ENEI) twice a year.

5.2.1 Honduras

In principle, it is possible to identify some returnees in Honduras using a question from the EPHPM on previous place of residence, which allows respondents to select "another country." Excluding people not born in Honduras from this group leaves only Hondurans who emigrated and later returned.

However, this indicator does not provide a complete picture of returnees. It does not distinguish between voluntary return and forced return (through detention and deportation), and it only captures people who have not moved residence since returning to Honduras. Many forcibly returned migrants cycle through temporary households before settling permanently, meaning this indicator only captures a subset of the returnee population.

The data support this conclusion. In the 2023 EPHPM, only 35 Honduran-born respondents reported a previous residence abroad: 23 had been in the United States, eight in other LAC countries, and four in Europe. In general, these returnees were adults, more likely to be employed, and had higher wages than the rest of the population.

Yet these numbers do not appear representative of Honduras's returnee population. The survey only identifies returnees indirectly and depends on a relatively unstable variable – whether they stayed in the same place after returning. Moreover, the share identified is far smaller than the proportion suggested by administrative data from reception centers, which undermines the reliability of these figures.

Table 11. Comparison of Labor Force Participation among Returnees and Non-Returnees in Honduras According to EPHPM (2023) (percentage)

	Man		Woman		
	Non-returnee	Returnee	Non-returnee	Returnee	Total
Employed	71	90	36	22	37
Unemployed	4	0	4	0	3
Not in the labor force	25	10	60	78	31
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Authors' calculations based on EPHPM 2023 data.

5.2.2 Guatemala

In principle, Guatemala's National Survey of Living Conditions (ENCOVI) can be used to identify returnees, but it faces the same limitations as the EPHPM in Honduras. The only question relevant to return migration on the ENCOVI is about respondents' place of residence five years earlier. Thus, ENCOVI 2014 identifies just 38 returnees out of a sample of 57,000 people, while ENCOVI 2023 reveals only 40 returnees out of a sample of 46,000. Such a low share is not consistent with estimates of Guatemala's returnee population.

Table 12. Labor Force Participation among Returnees and Non-Returnees in Guatemala According to ENCOVI (2023) (percentage)

	Man		Woman		
	Non-returnee	Returnee	Non-returnee	Returnee	Total
Employed	81	88	38	47	38
Unemployed	1	0	1	0	1
Not in the labor force	18	12	60	53	28
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: MIG calculations based on ENCOVI 2023 data.

Despite the limitations described above, these data suggest that returnees have higher employment rates than non-returnees. Among men, 88% of returnees were employed, compared with 81% of non-returnees; among women, the employment rate was 47% for returnees and 38% for non-returnees. While this might indicate that return has a positive impact on labor insertion, more reliable information is needed to guide labor reintegration policies.

The ENCOVI is also not administered regularly. It was first conducted in 2000 and repeated in 2006, 2011, and 2014, following a cycle of roughly five years until it was suspended. The survey resumed in 2023, with results released only recently.

5.2.3 El Salvador

El Salvador's EHPM does not collect data on respondents' nationality or migration history. As a result, it is impossible to distinguish people who have emigrated or attempted to emigrate from those who have never left.

The review of household surveys across NCA shows that information on the returnee population has not been an explicit objective for any of the three countries. Questionnaire design only allows returnees to be identified indirectly, leading to under-representation (or under-identification) in the statistics and, in turn, to poorly informed and potentially biased conclusions about this group. NCA countries need to collect specific data on this population in order to better support their reintegration.

5.3 Academic Surveys

A more effective way to identify returnees in surveys would be to ask directly about migration experience. LAPOP has conducted surveys across the region and progressively refined its approach to identifying returnees in NCA.

The 2004 survey included a question asking whether the respondent had lived in the United States in the past three years. However, it yielded very few affirmative answers. After this, the LAPOP surveys did not include any questions on the topic of return for a period of almost 15 years. Then, in a survey carried out between 2018 and 2019, LAPOP added a question asking whether the respondent had lived in another country within the past five years, again with limited results. In 2022, LAPOP surveyed more than 1,000 people in each of the three NCA countries and, instead of focusing on recent places where the respondent lived, it posed a direct question on migration: "Have you ever tried to emigrate to another country?" Sixteen percent of Hondurans, 13% of Salvadorans, and 7% of Guatemalans responded affirmatively. Although the sample is relatively small, these results are broadly consistent with administrative data.

When the numbers of returnees reported by the IOM between 2017 and 2023 are added together, returnees account for around 4% of Hondurans, 3% of Guatemalans, and 2% of Salvadorans. Given that circular migration – both voluntary and forced – between these countries and the United States has existed since the 1980s, the LAPOP estimates appear reasonable, though larger-scale surveys should be conducted to validate them.

For respondents who reported they had tried to emigrate, LAPOP's 2022 survey included a question about the outcome. Roughly half said they had never reached their intended destination, while between 10% (in Guatemala) and 26% (in Honduras) reported that they had arrived but were deported. Finally, nearly 40% in El Salvador and Guatemala and 20% in Honduras said they had returned voluntarily.

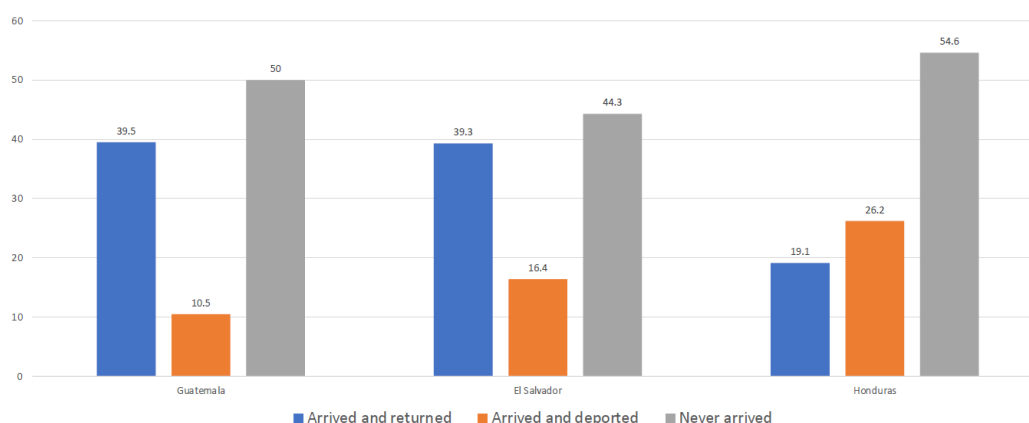


Figure 33. Outcome of the Most Recent Migration Attempt among NCA Returnees

Source: Córdova et al. (2024).

The results from the LAPOP survey suggest that repeat migration is a long-standing phenomenon and confirm that it can be captured not only in reception surveys but also in general population surveys. Lessons learned from LAPOP's evolving methodology for identifying returnees are valuable for new surveys designed with similar aims and point to good practices that NCA statistical offices could adopt to improve household surveys.

The statistics generated by the 2022 LAPOP survey are very useful for quantifying the population that has migrated and certain aspects of its journeys. However, this methodology has been applied only once to date.²⁶ The questions should be repeated, validated, and integrated into the instruments produced by the national statistics offices.

26. According to informal discussions with LAPOP staff, the survey was implemented again in 2024, but no data from that round have been released.

Incorporating these questions into national employment surveys, for instance, would make it possible to measure employment gaps between those who never emigrated and those who have returned. It would also allow researchers to estimate how long it takes returnees to achieve employment levels comparable to non-migrants; this estimate can serve as a reference point for evaluating labor market reinsertion programs.

Table 13. Comparison of NCA Household Surveys

Source	Advantages	Limitations
El Salvador: EHPM	Continuous survey. In 2024, with the support of UNHCR, it incorporated a module to identify persons displaced due to conflict and violence.	The survey does not include questions about migration, making it impossible to identify returnees. The UNHCR module primarily captures internally displaced persons (IDPs).
Guatemala: ENCOVI	Identifies returnees only if they were living abroad exactly five years before the survey.	In 2023, only 40 respondents met this criterion, too few to draw meaningful conclusions about their characteristics.
Honduras: EHPM	Identifies returnees only if their previous place of residence was abroad.	In 2023, only 35 respondents met this criterion, too few to draw meaningful conclusions about their characteristics.
LAPOP	The 2022 LAPOP survey included questions on migration history, enabling both voluntary and forced returnees to be identified.	This version of the survey has been carried out only once, so it is uncertain whether the resulting estimates of the returnee population are consistent over time.

Source: Authors' compilation.

Likewise, identifying returnees within the population would make it possible to establish benchmarks to estimate housing quality, educational levels among their children, and the extent of gender gaps. Pursuing such analyses will require adjustments to existing household surveys.

The absence of official statistics that clearly identify returnees is arguably the most significant data gap. Closing it is essential for understanding – and ultimately strengthening – the reintegration process of returned migrants. Investments are needed to improve official data collection instruments so they can systematically identify this population.

The next chapter examines existing and potential administrative data sources that can support the design of policies for returnees.

6. Administrative Data that Include Returnees

Key Messages

Governments generate large volumes of administrative data, yet there is considerable scope to manage, analyze, and use them more effectively. Once such information becomes accessible, the agencies engaged in socioeconomic reintegration will play a central role in putting it to use.

Integrating data from different sources will enable a more comprehensive analysis of the reintegration process, forming the basis for policies that help returnees overcome the barriers they face.

Agencies that provide direct services to returnees are not the only institutions that interact with them; socioeconomic reintegration involves a wide range of actors. Identifying the challenges returnees face in this process requires thorough analytical work.

Administrative records generated through agency interactions with returnees often contain sensitive personal information. Accordingly, adequate technical and financial resources are needed to compile, anonymize, and analyze these data more effectively.

6.1 Data from Other Ministries and Agencies

All three NCA countries generate administrative data on returnees, but these data are generally not made public. If the data are incomplete or collected irregularly, they are of limited use for assessing conditions and the economic and social reintegration challenges this population faces. The systematic organization of these data would add considerable value, facilitating the creation of baselines, supporting the measurement of outcomes in project evaluations, and enabling monitoring over the medium and the long term.

In Honduras, discussions held with the ministries of Education and Labor in the context of IDB operations have shown that these institutions are able to identify returned migrants among the citizens they serve through various programs. As these projects advance, access to the data collected will be highly valuable, while ensuring that individual privacy is always protected. Each project should include provisions to strengthen these data collection and analysis systems, so as to enable consistent tracking over time.

6.2 Other Agencies

There are other government agencies tasked with providing various forms of support to returnees, some of which produce relevant data and have already been mentioned above. However, there are others that, due to resource constraints or their institutional mandate, are not currently generating records that are useful for analysis, although they could potentially do so.

In September 2023, the responsibilities of El Salvador's National Council for the Protection and Advancement of Migrants and Their Families (CONMIGRANTES) were transferred to the Vice-Ministry for the Diaspora and Human Mobility (El Salvador, 2023). This type of institutional change must take into account the capacity to generate data that can contribute to policy design while safeguarding existing data flows. Similarly, the establishment of the Ventanillas de Atención a Migrantes Retornados (Service Windows for Return Migrants) in El Salvador should include robust mechanisms to document and record every interaction with users. Taken together, these data can be used to assess the impact of initiatives and to inform the design of future interventions.

In Guatemala, CONAMIGUA, in coordination with consular offices, interacts with Guatemalans abroad. The IGM, in collaboration with the Air Force, is responsible for receiving returnees and collecting basic information from this population. The Ministry of Labor has published the National Strategy for the Labor Market Reintegration of Returned Guatemalan Migrants, which involves the Labor Mobility Department (DML), the National Employment Service (SNE), and the Labor Market Observatory (OML). It is important that this strategy include the collection and systematic organization of data generated in the course of its implementation.

In Honduras, the CAMRs receive returnees and conduct the interviews, and the resulting records populate the SIAMIR database. The National Council for the Protection of Honduran Migrants (CONAPROHM), led by the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, works with Hondurans abroad but generally does not produce structured databases; it would be extremely useful to capitalize on its contact with the diaspora to compile information that can contribute to public policy design. The Office for Assistance to Return Migrants (OFAMIR) in the Office for the Protection of the Honduran Migrant (DGPHM) is in a similar position, particularly given its close contact with the returnee population.

Although there are additional agencies in each country that interact with returned migrants, these examples illustrate how relevant data for receiving and reintegrating returnees can be generated by analyzing the operations of other government actors.

6.3 Other Useful Data for Policy Design

Evidence on the effectiveness of programs implemented in Central America remains limited. Several bilateral donors, such as USAID, have financed civil society and IOM initiatives to expand reception and reintegration programs that reached approximately 120,000 people in NCA countries between 2020 and 2022 (The White House, 2022). Most of these programs focus on reception, and interventions are often fragmented because of limited coordination among institutions (Argueta et al., 2022).

A 2021 report by the United States Government Accountability Office – one of the main funders of programs that support returned migrants – found that existing data did not allow for conclusions about how these programs affected beneficiaries' intentions to migrate. This is due both to insufficient data and the fact that programs generally do not invest in assessing their own impact (United States Government Accountability Office, 2018 and 2022).

6.3.1 The Migration Activity Index of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP, Guatemala)

Available information sources should be combined wherever possible. In 2024, for example, the UNDP published an analysis of migration activity in Guatemala based on a combination of 2018 census variables and administrative records from the Guatemala Migration Activity Index (IAMG) described above (UNDP, 2024). Although the census does not identify returnees, as explained in the previous chapter, it does capture households receiving remittances, the existence of family members abroad, and the place of residence of each household member five years prior to the survey.

In the UNDP analysis, the percentage of households that meet each of these criteria and the number of returnees are calculated for each municipality using IGM data. On this basis, it constructs a municipal-level migration activity index that makes it possible to identify municipalities with high levels of both emigration and return so that relevant policy measures can be targeted to those areas.

UNDP's work is useful, but it has certain limitations. In particular, it relies on a methodology in which phenomena such as forced return and re-migration are under-represented. Migrants whose migration trajectories were interrupted or cut short constitute a vulnerable population that is further disadvantaged by this lack of data.

6.3.2 The Migration Propensity Index of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI, Guatemala)

In a study entitled “The Migration Propensity Index: An Application to Guatemala” (IFPRI, 2020), Ceballos and Hernández developed a methodology for analyzing the likelihood of emigration based on surveys conducted under USAID projects in Guatemala. The methodology relies on 12 household indicators, seven of which can be obtained from the census; using these, the study predicted with 93% accuracy whether one or more household members would emigrate in the following 12 months.

In a subsequent paper, the authors replicated the analysis using only the seven census variables to generate a Migration Propensity Index (MPI) for the entire country, identifying several departments and municipalities whose populations had a high probability of emigrating. This type of study is a good example of how these data can be used to design and target investments for the reintegration of returnees.

The next chapter presents an overview of the legal and institutional frameworks for the reception and reintegration of returned migrants in the three NCA countries.

7. Returnees: Institutional Frameworks in NCA Countries

Key Messages

NCA countries are strengthening the capacity of their institutions to promote the reintegration of returnees, but have yet to implement existing plans.

El Salvador has a modern migration law and a reintegration plan for returned migrants that was approved and presented in the third quarter of 2025.

Guatemala presented its Plan Retorno al Hogar in the first half of 2025. There is also a 2023 migration policy document; many of its lines of action relate to the reception and reintegration of returnees.

Honduras has an adequate legal framework and a Migration Governance Council, though institutional capacity to implement reintegration programs remains limited.

All three NCA countries have institutional frameworks that have been evolving in response to the large inflows of returnees. Migration policy frameworks are not fully developed, leading to ad hoc adjustments in response to changing circumstances. At the same time, the entities responsible for migration are in the process of strengthening their institutions (Selee et al., 2021).

Currently, the three countries are in the early stages of developing inter-agency processes aimed at formulating a unified response to the challenges posed by return flows. If these flows increase, response capacity could be compromised.

Foreign ministries have assumed a central, direct role in policy formulation, reflecting both the international nature of migration agreements and the need to address the issue through diplomatic channels. Law enforcement and migration control have mainly been handled by the police and the armed forces, which can play an even more effective role after receiving specialized training in managing migrant populations.

Overall, the region already has an institutional foundation for addressing the challenges of migration and return. Although this foundation is still being developed, NCA has made important progress in adapting to changing conditions. Ongoing efforts to strengthen institutions and collaborations mean that countries have a foundation upon which they can continue building capacities.

7.1 El Salvador

In El Salvador, two entities are responsible for providing services to returned migrants. The DGME handles reception, registration, and humanitarian assistance, while the Vice-Ministry for the Diaspora and Human Mobility is responsible for inter-agency coordination and for promoting reintegration opportunities across the country.

In 2011, the Special Act for the Protection and Advancement of Migrants and Their Families created CONMIGRANTES, an inter-agency coordination body responsible for designing policies in favor of migrants and their families. It works in areas such as labor market integration, training and skills certification, recognition of foreign qualifications, scholarships, and psychological care.

In 2019, the Special Migration and Foreign Nationals Act (LEME) was enacted to strengthen the service infrastructure for migrants. The law includes a specific chapter on reception and return and, in article 322, tasked the DGME with providing immediate assistance to Salvadoran returnees in coordination with public and private entities and international organizations. The DGME's Migrant Services Management Unit implements migrant reception through the Bienvenido a Casa (Welcome Home) program and, when needed, provides domestic transportation and tickets, medical and psychological care, telephone access, and other assistance.

In September 2023, the Legislative Assembly of El Salvador approved a bill to dissolve CONMIGRANTES and transfer its responsibilities directly to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which, through the Vice-Ministry for the Diaspora and Human Mobility, now exercises the powers, duties, and obligations previously held by CONMIGRANTES.

In August 2025, the Legislative Assembly enacted the Special Act on Benefits and Protection for the Diaspora and People in Human Mobility. The law creates a comprehensive framework to encourage Salvadorans abroad to return voluntarily while strengthening consular protection and facilitating diaspora investments in El Salvador. The law combines tax incentives, financial and investment support measures, coordination mechanisms, and labor market reintegration, and includes options for labor mobility.

Complementing this new legislation, the government presented the National Reintegration Plan for Returnees, developed with IDB support and implemented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Vice-Ministry for the Diaspora and Human Mobility. The plan is part of a joint effort by institutions that aim to ensure that as many returned migrants as possible remain in the country. Achieving this goal requires updated, impartial, and reliable information. At the individual level, the plan seeks to meet beneficiaries' specific needs and, where relevant, those of their families or households. At the community level, it seeks to address the concerns of returnees' families and of non-migrant residents in communities of return, in order to foster social cohesion in areas with high return rates. At the structural level, it seeks to guarantee access to public services and the right to a dignified life.

The plan includes lines of action to:

- i) Establish service channels for returned migrants, both those who returned voluntarily and those who were forcibly returned.
- ii) Maintain a database on the returnee population that includes at least each migrant's general profile, and design a strategic plan to meet the needs of people who return to the country.
- iii) Actively promote access to employment opportunities and support entrepreneurial initiatives – preferably in communities of origin – through financing mechanisms and job and technical training.
- iv) Offer reintegration programs for returned migrants that can be expanded to more communities, with the aim of preventing irregular migration.

7.2 Guatemala

Decree 46/2007 (Law on the National Council for Guatemalan Migrant Assistance) stipulates that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs must provide services to citizens returning to the country voluntarily or forcibly through its consular offices. Under the auspices of the ministry, CONAMIGUA provides services to returnees. This council was created by Congress, which is responsible for appointing its members.

Decree 44/2016 (Migration Law) assigns responsibility for returnee services to the National Migration Authority and the Guatemalan Migration Institute, which was created in 2020 and is still in the process of consolidating its role as an autonomous body. The Ministry of Labor has in place a National Policy on Decent Employment for 2017–2032, which includes labor market reintegration for returned migrants through training and technical skills certification with support from the Ministry of Education. The policy is currently being updated by the present administration.

Guatemala's Migration Policy is issued by the Office of the Vice President in its role as the National Migration Authority. The IGM is responsible for implementing policy measures. Published in 2024, the policy calls for "strengthening mechanisms for the dignified, safe return of Guatemalan nationals abroad and foreigners in Guatemala, with emphasis on those in vulnerable situations" under Pillar 1 (Human Rights and Vulnerable Groups), Strategic Objective 1.6. This translates into six measures, summarized in Table 14.

In addition to this strategic objective that targets returnees, the Migration Policy includes other measures that affect the return and reintegration process; these are described in Table 15.

In the first quarter of 2025, the Plan Retorno al Hogar was published. It is composed of three phases. The first, *Cerca de ti* (Close to You), includes measures aimed at providing information and consular support abroad to individuals detained for repatriation. The second, *Regreso Digno* (Dignified Return), focuses on humanitarian aid and immediate assistance for returnees upon arrival in Guatemala. The third, *Nuevas Oportunidades* (New Opportunities), includes activities aimed at training, socioeconomic development, and employability. At the end of the second quarter, the CAR was inaugurated as part of the second phase to provide health and well-being services as well as job placement services.

Table 14. Lines of Action for Returnees under Pillar 1 of Guatemala's Migration Policy and Related Actors

Action	Responsible institutions	Related institutions
1.6.1 Ensure the return process for Guatemalan nationals is dignified, respectful, and safe, especially for those in vulnerable situations, by fostering professional support tailored to different needs.	CAP, CONAMIGUA, IGM	MINGOB, MINTRAB, PSMAS, PDH, PGN, RENAP, SBS, SOSEP, SVET
1.6.2 Ensure the deportation process for Guatemalan nationals is dignified, respectful, and safe, especially for those in vulnerable situations, by fostering professional support tailored to different needs.	MINEX	IGM
1.6.3 Promote cooperation and regular dialogue with countries in the region to ensure full respect for the human rights of Guatemalan nationals abroad who are facing return or deportation.	CONAMIGUA, MINEX	MINEX
1.6.4 Strengthen institutional performance and promote inter-agency and cross-sectoral coordination in the reception and comprehensive assistance for Guatemalan returnees.	CAP, IGM, CONAMIGUA, MINGOB, MINTRAB, MSPAS, PDH, PGN, RENAP, SBS, SOSEP, SVET	
1.6.5 Increase the number of centers for the reception of Guatemalan returnees.	IGM	
1.6.6 Ensure effective access to the right of foreign migrants to be returned to their country of origin or provenance.	IGM	

Source: Authors' compilation based on Guatemala's Migration Policy.

Acronyms: Permanent Assistance Centers for Migrants (Centros de Atención Permanente para los Migrantes, CAP, in Spanish), National Council for Guatemalan Migrant Assistance (Consejo Nacional de Atención al Migrante, CONAMIGUA), Guatemalan Migration Institute (Instituto Guatemalteco de Migración, IGM), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, MINEX), Ministry of the Interior (Ministerio de Gobernación, MINGOB), Ministry of Labor (Ministerio del Trabajo, MINTRAB), Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance (Ministerio de Salud Pública y Asistencia Social, MSPAS), Human Rights Ombudsman (Procurador de los Derechos Humanos, PDH), Office of the Attorney General (Procuraduría General de la Nación, PGN), National Registry of Persons (Registro Nacional de las Personas, RENAP), Secretariat of Social Welfare (Secretaría de Bienestar Social, SBS), Secretariat of Social Work of the Office of the First Lady (Secretaría de Obras Sociales de la Esposa del Presidente, SOSEP), Secretariat against Sexual Violence, Exploitation, and Trafficking in Persons (Secretaría contra la Violencia Sexual, Explotación y Trata de Personas, SVET).

Table 15. Lines of Action for Returnees under Other Pillars of Guatemala's Migration Policy and Related Actors

Action	Responsible institutions	Related institutions
1.1.3 Provide consular assistance, services, and protection to Guatemalan nationals abroad, with emphasis on individuals in vulnerable situations.	MINEX	CONAMIGUA
1.1.4 Provide guidance on migration law guidance to Guatemalan nationals abroad, with a particular focus on the United States and Mexico.	MINEX	
1.1.5 Promote cooperation strategies and dialogue with countries in the region to strengthen respect for the human rights of Guatemalan nationals abroad, regardless of their migration status.	PDH	MINEX
2.1.3 Strengthen inter-agency coordination for health care services in reception centers for deported or returned Guatemalan nationals and in Migrant Assistance Centers.	CAP, IGM	MSPAS
2.2.3 Promote scholarship programs for returning Guatemalans, those seeking international protection, and recognized refugees.	MINEDUC	INTECAP
2.3.1 Promote the skills certification system in other countries for the benefit of Guatemalan nationals living abroad.	MINEDUC, MINTRAB	INTECAP, SBS
2.4.8 Promote inter-agency and cross-sectoral mechanisms to support housing development projects for Guatemalan returnees.	MICIVI	
2.4.9 Build partnerships to develop initiatives for young Guatemalan returnees.	CONJUVE	
3.5.2 Promote innovation in data collection on Guatemalan nationals abroad.	MINEX	
4.1.2 Promote cooperatives as a model for territorial economic development with returned migrants and Guatemalan nationals abroad.	INACOP	
4.1.3 Promote inter-agency and cross-sectoral collaborations on science, technology, and innovation to connect Guatemalan returnees and nationals abroad.	SENACYT	
4.1.4 Include families of Guatemalan returnees in initiatives related to family farming and agricultural and livestock activities.	MAGA	

Source: Authors' compilation based on Guatemala's Migration Policy.

Acronyms: Permanent Assistance Centers for Migrants (Centros de Atención Permanente para los Migrantes, CAP, in Spanish), National Council for Guatemalan Migrant Assistance (Consejo Nacional de Atención al Migrante, CONAMIGUA), National Youth Council (Consejo Nacional de la Juventud, CONJUVE), Guatemalan Migration Institute (Instituto Guatemalteco de Migración, IGM), National Institute of Cooperatives (Instituto Nacional de Cooperativas, INACOP), Technical Training and Productivity Institute (Instituto Técnico de Capacitación y Productividad, INTECAP), Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Food (Ministerio de Agricultura, Ganadería y Alimentación, MAGA), Ministry of Communications, Infrastructure, and Housing (Ministerio de Comunicaciones, Infraestructura y Vivienda, MICIVI), Ministry of Education (Ministerio de Educación, MINEDUC), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, MINEX), Ministry of Labor (Ministerio del Trabajo, MINTRAB), Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance (Ministerio de Salud Pública y Asistencia Social, MSPAS), Human Rights Ombudsman (Procurador de los Derechos Humanos, PDH), Secretariat of Social Welfare (Secretaría de Bienestar Social, SBS), National Science and Technology System (Sistema Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología, SENACYT).

7.3 Honduras

Under the Migration and Foreign Nationals Act, the National Institute of Migration of Honduras works with public and private institutions to develop support and assistance programs for Honduran migrants who return to the country and are in vulnerable situations. This mandate is implemented at the three CAMRs.

The 2013 Law on the Protection of Honduran Migrants and Their Families provides for the protection of citizens abroad and establishes programs to support the social and economic integration of returnees. The law created the CONAPROHM, which is under the authority of the SRECI and is responsible for providing support to Honduran migrants abroad.

OFAMIR, which operates under the auspices of the DGPHM, is responsible for implementing policy and various reintegration programs.

At the CAMRs, returned migrants are received under a protocol developed through inter-institutional coordination, with support from various actors and agencies. When return flows increase unexpectedly, budget constraints often arise.

Once returnees leave the CAMRs, service provision becomes more complex. Two issues require particular attention.

First, in terms of infrastructure, the DGPHM, which is under the authority of the SRECI, does not have dedicated spaces for the Municipal Offices for Reintegration and Support to Returnees (OMRAR). As a result, staff provide services in offices made available by municipalities. This poses a significant challenge for the quality of assistance offered to returnees. These spaces are generally small and open, making them inadequate for protecting users' privacy. This has a negative impact on the quantity and quality of information that can be collected at this stage of the return process.

Second, in terms of the scope and specificity of services, there is only one officer in each OMRAR office, which is insufficient to meet the demand for specialized services that returnees require in each municipality. Given these staffing constraints, it is impossible to provide differentiated services for women, LGBTIQ+ people, or individuals in specific situations of vulnerability.

Conclusions

Key Messages

The specific circumstances and history of each of the three NCA countries have given rise to return migrant populations with different characteristics.

All three NCA countries are effectively gathering data on returnees during reception but face difficulties in monitoring the returnee population after arrival.

The most significant information gap concerns the stock of people who have had the experience of migrating and the impact this has on their lives.

Monitoring of the returnee population in Northern Central America has improved at the point of arrival, but major challenges remain for medium- and long-term follow-up. The main knowledge gap concerns the trajectories of returnees and the impact of their migration experience on their communities of origin. The following priorities have been identified for improving available information:

1. Improving the collection and analysis of administrative data in countries of return is essential for designing more effective policies. There are relevant data sources in the United States and Mexico – including statistics on repatriations, asylum, and migration histories – that can complement the information collected during the reception of returned migrants.

2. Strengthening administrative records at both reception and in reintegration support activities requires better coordination among institutions, greater information sharing between origin and destination countries, and regional cooperation to share good practices. In the past year, there have been significant advances in information processing in:

- Reception centers in Guatemala.
- Existing systems in Honduras that have been strengthened and seen technical improvements, with major progress using tools from the ODS.
- Inter-agency coordination to make better use of available information in El Salvador.

3. Including questions about return in household surveys would allow better profiling of this population while assessing its socioeconomic integration. Methodologies such as LAPOP provide a useful foundation, and national statistics offices in NCA countries have already expressed interest in advancing this approach.

4. Linking the ministries and agencies that provide services to returnees will allow their access to education, health, and employment to be monitored while assessing their reintegration process. This type of monitoring would also help estimate the risk of re-migration and allow policy responses to be adjusted accordingly.

The characteristics of migration vary in each of the three countries, as do the returnees themselves.

El Salvador is the country where the returnee population has been settled the longest. The LAPOP 2022 survey cited in Córdova et al. (2024) found that 70% of individuals identified as returnees (that is, with prior migration experience) had been back in the country for more than five years. This share falls to under 60% among Guatemalans and to 45% among Hondurans – differences that may reflect variations in the skills and resources migrants acquired abroad, though no representative official statistics exist to examine this hypothesis in depth.

Although most reintegration initiatives are short term, it is essential to strengthen institutions to achieve sustainable, long-term reintegration. It is therefore essential to support countries in building their capacity to collect, organize, analyze, and disseminate data within their government institutions, thereby enabling them to assess the impact of their initiatives.

The literature shows that most reintegration initiatives in NCA have been short-term, funded through international cooperation as pilot projects or one-off actions that are not easily sustained over time (Argueta et al., 2022; Quinteros, Aguilar, and Rivera, 2021). As countries build coordinated reintegration programs, they will also need to allocate domestic resources to sustain these efforts. This, in turn, should be accompanied by adequate measurement of the returnee population, based on systematic methods for capturing, compiling, and analyzing data. National statistical offices will need to incorporate specific questions into their regular surveys to identify returnees, so that analysis does not depend on isolated ad hoc surveys or those carried out by third parties.

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Legal Framework

El Salvador

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Appendix

Links to Data Sources

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

IOM Returned Migrants Portal for Central America

<https://infounitnca.iom.int/en/c-a-north-returns/>

The IOM compiles data from official sources in each country. Therefore, the information is not always the most up to date, and data are refreshed at different intervals in each country.

OIM Displacement Tracking Matrix

<https://dtm.iom.int/>

The DTMs are usually implemented on an ad hoc basis, have limited statistical reliability, or are only representative of the subsample actually interviewed. However, they are useful for preliminary information when better data are not available.

Eurostat

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_eirtn1_custom_12944374/default/table?lang=en

Data source on migrants who are returned by European Union member states. Caution is needed when using these data, because the definitions do not necessarily match those used for returns to NCA by the United States and Mexico.

ACADEMIC/NGO

Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP)

<https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/studies-country.php>

Historically, LAPOP has not produced particularly useful results on returnees. However, its 2022 survey adopted a revised methodology that allows them to be identified more clearly.

Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC)

<https://tracreports.org/immigration/tools/>

This portal publishes relevant data on the processing of asylum applications in the United States. Its drawback is that not all variables can be disaggregated by nationality, which limits the possibility of analyzing the applications of NCA migrants.

Colegio de la Frontera Norte (EMIF)

<https://www.colef.mx/emif/index.html>

The EMIF is a useful tool for analyzing migration flows through Mexico. However, its sample sizes have decreased in recent years.

UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

Office of Homeland Security Statistics (OHSS)

<https://ohss.dhs.gov/topics/immigration>

This new office was created in 2023. Among other changes, it expanded and made independent the unit that had been publishing statistics on immigration in the United States.

Customs and Border Protection (CBP)

<https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters>

This CBP site provides the most up-to-date figures on encounters at the US southern border.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)

<https://www.ice.gov/doclib/eoy/iceAnnualReportFY2022.pdf>

ICE is the entity responsible for carrying out repatriations of returnees, which it reports as “Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO)” in its statistics.

Current Population Survey

<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps.html>

One of the household surveys managed by the US Census Bureau. It provides information about the immigrant population in the country. The American Community Survey is also relevant; it asks some different questions and is more representative at the state and municipal levels.

MEXICAN GOVERNMENT

Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB) – Unidad de Política Migratoria (UPM)

<http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx>

SEGOB's Migration Policy Unit publishes a detailed statistical bulletin on people who are returned to their country of nationality, primarily those from NCA.

Comisión de Ayuda para los Refugiados (COMAR)

<https://www.gob.mx/comar>

COMAR publishes data on the number of applications for international protection received by nationality. It also includes the number of cases resolved; however, the backlog must be inferred from the difference between applications and decisions.

GOVERNMENT OF EL SALVADOR

Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería (DGME)

<https://www.transparencia.gob.sv/institutions/dgme>

DGME data are published on El Salvador's government transparency site.

Oficina Nacional de Estadística y Censos (ONEC)

<https://onec.bcr.gob.sv/>

In El Salvador, this office, which is part of the Central Reserve Bank, is responsible for statistics.

GOVERNMENT OF GUATEMALA

Instituto Guatemalteco de Migración (IGM)

<https://igm.gob.gt/informes-estadisticos/>

The main source of data on returnees, compiled during reception. The IGM publishes a useful data dashboard and offers downloads of raw data. Time series, however, are not equal in length across all tools.

Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE)

<https://www.ine.gob.gt/publicaciones3.php>

Guatemala's INE publishes data from its various household surveys. Currently, it is very difficult to identify returnees in these surveys.

GOVERNMENT OF HONDURAS

Instituto Nacional de Migración

<https://inm.gob.hn/retornados.html>

The INM website is user friendly, but the data combine categories of returnees that do not reflect the target population: Hondurans repatriated from the United States and Mexico.

Sistema de Atención al Migrante Retornado (SIAMIR)

<http://redatam.ods.sedesol.gob.hn/redbin/RpWebEngine.exe/Portal?BASE=SI-AMIR&lang=esp>

The SIAMIR has detailed data on returnees. It provides access to nearly all the data requested from returnees during the reception process. The challenge is that the system lacks resources and at times has no staff available to digitize the paper forms, which results in gaps in coverage.

Observatorio Consular y Migratorio de Honduras (CONMIGHO)

<https://conmigho.hn/>

Historically, CONMIGHO has been the best source of data on returnees to Honduras. However, it appears that publication of these statistics ceased in 2024. The IOM cites CONMIGHO as its source for returnee data on its portal. It is probably the best source for tracking the total numbers of returnees.

Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE)

<https://ine.gob.hn/>

Honduras's household survey allows returnees to be identified, but only in a limited way.

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Translation: Wendy Gosselin
Proofreading: Andrés Arenales Duarte
Layout: Lucila Schonfeld
Design: ZkySky, Valeria Dulitzky and Julieta Ulanovsky
Design collaboration: Camila Macca

