

# **Child Immigration Crisis from the Perspective of Central America**

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Contrary to much of the U.S. media coverage, this is not a “new” crisis but rather the latest chapter in a permanent crisis that has existed for two decades in Central America. As Pastor Blanca Irma Rodriguez, coordinator of Migrant Ministry for the Salvadoran Lutheran Church, explained recently:

“At first, it was men who emigrated and their children were left in the care of their mothers. Then women emigrated as well in order to help support their children; when they left, the care of their children fell to grandparents, aunts & uncles and other relatives. Now it’s the children themselves who find themselves needing to emigrate, some to be reunited with their parents but the majority for reasons of security.”

The underlying problem is poverty, economies which do not generate sufficient job opportunities and with highly unequal distributions of income and wealth. When families are pushed to the brink, the emigration of one or more family members becomes their best option for economic survival. Economic poverty has and will continue to account for a significant percentage of the individuals who emigrate to the U.S. from Central America, adults as well as minors.

The numbers spike when other factors come into play such as gang-related violence. Recent studies have concluded that the principal reason behind the exponential increase in unaccompanied children entering the U.S. from Central America over the past 3 years – from less than 7,000 in 2011 to a projected 90,000 in 2014 – are the threats, insecurity & violence that they face in their countries of origin.

According to Geoff Thale, program director at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA):

“For both minors and adults, what we’re seeing is the cumulative effect of years of growing levels of violence. If you look at homicide rates in the northern countries of Central America, they have grown consistently from 2003 on. In all three countries, they have more than doubled over that time. In Honduras, they have probably tripled. In some areas of Honduras, they have quadrupled. They are at numbers that are something like 20 or 25 times the homicide rate in the U.S. That has a huge impact. Especially for kids, the problem of gang violence has a huge and deleterious impact.”

Desperate to get their adolescent children out of life-threatening situations, parents in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have been all-to-willing to believe the information that *coyotes* are circulating about preferential treatment of minors by U.S. immigration authorities; information that has been incomplete and often misleading.

For children who made the trip through Mexico, turned themselves in to Border Police and are now in the custody of another relative legally residing in the U.S., their families back in Central America now realize that the ultimate fate of their children will be decided by an immigration hearing. It is not a foregone conclusion that they will be able to live permanently in the U.S., as they were led to believe. Similarly, an erroneous perception exists that children accompanied by their mother (or another adult relative) receive the same treatment as unaccompanied minors which is not the case.

To complicate matters further, there is a new element that will almost certainly trigger another surge in emigration from Central America to the U.S. It has to do with Central America’s environmental vulnerability. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, storms, flooding, landslides and drought make it one of the most vulnerable regions in the world.

Currently, the countries of Central America are entering the critical stages of a prolonged drought. Originally, the predictions were that El Salvador & Nicaragua would be hardest hit. But the government of Guatemala just declared a “state of emergency” in 16 of its 22 departments after more than 200,000 families lost their crops to the current drought. The **World Food Program director for Latin American & the Caribbean has predicted that 2.5 million people will be affected** by this drought in the three countries of the Northern Triangle plus Nicaragua.

While the current crisis around unaccompanied minors may ease on the U.S. side of the border, virtually nothing has been done to address the principal “push factors” here in Central America. Until greater attention & resources are devoted to addressing the root causes of the problem, emigration will continue at permanently high levels.

Response of GM companions prior to the current crisis

With the limited resources at their disposal, our GM companions have been addressing the so-called “push factors” on immigration for many years. Here’s a quick overview of their efforts:

Country	Alleviation/Reduction of Poverty	Counteracting Social Violence	Reducing Environmental Vulnerability
<b>El Salvador</b>	A former refugee camp run by the <i>Iglesia Luterana Salvadoreña</i> (ILS) during the country’s civil war has been converted into an experimental farm. There, peasant farmers are trained in ecologically-responsible ways to diversify and improve their crops yields so that they stay on the land.	<p>ILS congregations provide scholarships to keep children &amp; adolescents in school, financed by an extensive network of sister parishes in the U.S. and Europe.</p> <p>The church is also experimenting with micro-enterprise initiatives for youth once they graduate from high school. Without economic possibilities in El Salvador, youth will turn to emigration as their only option.</p> <p>The ILS has a strong youth ministry program, at a congregational &amp; national level. A central focus has been community-based programs on the prevention of violence where teenagers themselves are the protagonists.</p>	<p>With its ecumenical partners in El Salvador’s ACT Forum (Action by Churches Together), the ILS works with poor communities on disaster risk reduction to keep them from becoming “climate refugees” after the next disaster – which is only a matter of time.</p> <p>Since 2011, the ILS has accompanied local advocacy initiatives of rural communities located along two major river systems. These rivers flood their banks after any significant weather event. Without major flood mitigation projects, over 8,000 families will lose their livelihoods.</p>

		<p>On a national level, the ILS has been active in the <b>Ecumenical Initiative for Peace (IPAZ)</b> since Nov. 2012. Originally, IPAZ focused on supporting a gang truce that went into effect in March 2012. Subsequent to the recent national elections, IPAZ has urged all sectors of Salvadoran society – government, the youth gangs themselves, business leaders, political parties, the police and churches – to unite behind a process of dialogue that will end gang-related violence and restore peace in El Salvador.</p>	
<b>Guatemala</b>	<p>The holistic pastoral accompaniment of the <i>Iglesia Luterana Agustina de Guatemala</i> (ILAG) includes initiatives to create more dignified living conditions for the residents of poor, indigenous villages, especially in terms of basic health &amp; sanitation.</p>	<p>In urban areas, the ILAG works to keep children &amp; adolescents in school (and out of gangs) by means of an accredited primary school (K-6) in a poor community just outside of G. City, as well as scholarships for secondary students.</p>	<p>The majority of ILAG faith communities are located in rural areas which suffer recurring weather-related disasters, principally rains &amp; flooding.</p> <p>Periodically, the ILAG trains church &amp; community leaders on disaster risk reduction principles. Following a specific event, the church responds with seeds &amp; other inputs so that peasant farmers can replant and recover some portion of their crop losses.</p>
<b>Honduras</b>	<p>For more than a decade, the <i>Iglesia Cristiana Luterana de Honduras</i> (ICLH) has created and expanded community-based development projects in both urban &amp; rural areas, with a priority focus on preventive health and child nutrition.</p>	<p>The ICLH provides scholarships for children &amp; adolescents at the elementary, secondary &amp; university level so that they stay in school and have life options beyond joining a youth gang or migrating to the US – the principal options for Honduran youth who grow up in poor communities.</p> <p>In mid-2014, the ICLH began a new project with an initial focus on the children in its Sunday School programs. ICLH</p>	<p>ICLH leaders – particularly youth – have been trained in the basics of disaster risk reduction so that they can respond appropriately in disaster situations.</p>

		congregations are located in some of the most violent neighborhoods in Honduras which, in turn, is considered the most violent country in the world. Working with Sunday School teachers and other community actors, the project aims to create a culture of peace through the development of social, cultural & spiritual values in children.	
<b>Northern Triangle countries</b>	Objective #2 of the current LWF/DWS program:  Contribute to the sustainable development of vulnerable communities through actions to protect their territories and for the improvement of their livelihoods (food production & security)		Objective #1 of the current LWF/DWS program:  Augment resilience to climate change with a rights-based approach, facilitating the implementation of innovative actions in disaster risk management and humanitarian advocacy
Along with the Lutheran churches, the other principal GM partner in Central America is the LWF World Service program.			

Participation of GM companions in the humanitarian response to the current crisis

In addition to the information presented in the previous table, most GM companions are also involved in the humanitarian response to the current crisis of unaccompanied minors, principally through their participation in the ACT Forum for each country.

LWF/DWS is a member of the ACT Forum in all 3 countries of the Northern Triangle; ILS is a member of the ACT Forum – El Salvador; and ICLH is a member of the ACT Forum – Honduras.

Apart from the population of unaccompanied minors who are receiving all the media attention in the U.S, large numbers of Central Americans are being detained in Mexico and sent back to their countries of origin by the busload.

Some percentage of the unaccompanied – and accompanied – minors that have reached the U.S. will be also deported back to Central America. In terms of resources, their host governments will be even less prepared to handle this surge in repatriations than the U.S. was to handle the dramatic increase in border crossings.

Consequently, the humanitarian assistance provided to those who are being repatriated from both Mexico and the U.S. is minimal – a month’s supply of groceries, a transportation allowance to get from the reception center for repatriates to their homes, etc.

For GM companions, their principal concern is the lack of any significant improvements in the conditions that forced people to emigrate in the first place. Their economic prospects may actually be worse due to the adverse effects of the current drought on food security. In the case of gang-related violence, the risks may actually be greater for those who return to the neighborhoods that they fled in the first place.

#### How ELCA companion synods and congregations can accompany their companion churches

First, it has to be said that the majority of ELCA people who are actively involved in a companion synod and/or companion congregation relationship are already aware of the immigration issue and its root causes. In fact, they and their congregations/synods are already providing significant support for the different initiatives summarized in the table presented on pp. 2-4 of this document.

Their participation & leadership will be critically important for the much more challenging task that lies ahead in two principal areas:

- Congregationally-based education on the so-called “push factors” that are at work here in Central America in contrast to the widely-accepted idea that immigrants are being “pulled” to the U.S. by the mythical notion of the “American dream”. Real-life stories will be critical in putting a human face on a complex and polarized issue.
- Greater ELCA participation in political advocacy not just in terms of ensuring adequate resources for the current humanitarian response to unaccompanied minors, but also in terms of breaking the partisan impasse on comprehensive immigration reform and increased U.S. assistance to Central America – Northern Triangle countries in particular – for strategies that have proven to be effective in addressing the twin causes of poverty and violence.
- ELCA constituency engagement in direct service to migrant populations through models such as synodical Welcoming Congregations and Guardian Angels programs as well as any other initiatives created by LIRS or other ELCA partners.