

2020 Model Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Briefing Paper – Migration in the Western Hemisphere

Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights and Global Women’s Issues

Topic Background

The world today is experiencing migration crises in almost every region of the world. More people today are migrating and are forcibly displaced from their homes than during World War II. Conflicts, economic crises, inefficient and corrupt governments, natural disasters and environmental factors have all driven people to seek resettlement in a new country. The Western Hemisphere has been no exception, with the migration crises in Central America and Venezuela being the most notable.

Immigration from Mexico and Central America has become a contentious, highly polarized political issue in the United States, especially over the course of the last decade. President Trump’s 2016 presidential platform focused greatly on immigration from these countries, especially illegal immigration, as one of the country’s most pressing issues and it has continued to remain a prominent topic in the media cycle and political action since. Debates on how to deal with the root causes of the migration issue and what policies should be enacted to deal with the hundreds of thousands of people who have moved



A migrant caravan walks into the interior of Mexico after crossing the Guatemalan border near Ciudad Hidalgo, Mexico on Oct. 21, 2018. (John Moore, Getty Images)

north through Central America to the southern U.S. border have intensified during Trump’s time in office. A large majority of Republicans and Democrats remain highly divided on this issue, and bipartisan attempts at passing immigration legislation have failed in the last few years. Despite this, thousands of migrants arrive at the southern U.S. border each day seeking safety, security, economic opportunity, and the opportunity for creating a livelihood that has eluded them in their **country of origin**.¹ Therefore, policymakers undeniably must create more effective solutions through policy and legislation change in the coming months and years.

¹ “How to address the causes of the migration crisis, according to experts.” [Vox](#), 2019.

The migration crisis in Venezuela is a less **salient** topic for the American public, but it is one of the foreign policy issues that has had bipartisan agreement and cooperation in the government. Both Republicans and Democrats have agreed that the Maduro regime is now illegitimate and is responsible for creating and perpetuating the economic crisis that has now turned into one of the world's largest humanitarian crises. This humanitarian crisis has forced over 4 million Venezuelans to flee over the course of the last FIVE years; that is about 10% of the country's population. Most Venezuelans have fled to surrounding South American countries, namely Colombia, Peru, Chile and Ecuador, although some have migrated to the United States and sought **asylum**. Venezuela is now the second country of origin for people forcibly displaced across borders after Syria.²

Major questions remain for U.S. policymakers and government officials in how they should tackle these major migration crises in the Western Hemisphere. What can the U.S. government do to address the root causes of the major migration crises in the Western Hemisphere? How effective have U.S. responses to these migration crises been? What new or revised responses can this subcommittee recommend in order to implement more effective responses to these crises? Is there a possibility for bipartisan collaboration on immigration policy regarding Central American migration into the United States?

Migration Crisis in Venezuela

A heavy reliance on oil exports, government corruption, mismanagement of funds, the sharp decline of global oil prices, and institutional changes moving towards **autocracy** have created a wide-scale economic and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela in since 2014.

The economic in Venezuela has caused issues with the national electricity system, causing tens of thousands of power failures and four major blackouts in 2019. Many Venezuelans also do not have reliable access to water. The government has implemented water rationing, with 33% of people having access to water once a week or less and 23% without access to clean water at all. **Hyperinflation** caused by the economic crisis has severely limited access to food and health care. Prices for food and medicine are absurdly high, and



The Tienditas bridge connecting Colombia and Venezuela, blocked by Venezuelan military forces and preventing humanitarian aid from entering the country. (Edinson Estupinan, Getty Images)

² "Understanding the Venezuelan Refugee Crisis." [Wilson Center](#), 2019.

oftentimes there is no food or medicine to buy in stores at all. Food production decreased by more than 60% between 2014 and 2018. Four out of five people have reported that food prices are too high for them to buy enough food for their family to survive and the average Venezuelan has lost 25 pounds since the onset of the crisis. As a result, Venezuelans have become increasingly dependent on the state to obtain food, but oftentimes the Local Committees for Supply and Production (CLAP) food boxes are only delivered once a month or every two months. In addition, because the CLAP program is run by the Maduro government, people who have been known to not support the government are often denied access to the food boxes, forcing some to vote for the ruling Maduro party in order to get enough food to survive. In terms of health care, only a fraction of the pharmaceutical companies that used to exist in the country are still operational, meaning that only one out of ten medicines needed by Venezuelans are available. Healthcare facilities are barely operational and a majority of healthcare providers, like doctors, have left the country.

Venezuelans are also facing increased rates of violence and insecurity as government rule weakens. The homicide rates have sharply increased, along with armed robberies and kidnapping. Those who demonstrate against the government have been targeted, especially those who live in poor neighborhoods. The Wilson Center, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, notes that “Since May 2016 Venezuela has been governed under a state of exception, which gives the president wide, vague, and discretionary powers to preserve ‘internal order.’ The police, armed forces, and intelligence agencies have been responsible for the excessive use of force during demonstrations and the arbitrary detention, ill-treatment, and torture of political opponents and their relatives.”³

The millions of Venezuelans who are fleeing due to an extreme lack of food, health care, political persecution, increased violence, and a collapse of basic services needed to live, have mostly gone to surrounding countries in the region. Colombia has received 1.4 million migrants, Peru 853,400, Ecuador 330,400, and Chile 288,200. While other countries in the region have not received as many migrants, the number they have received now makes up a significant part of their country’s population. For example, Aruba has received 16,000 and Curaçao 26,000, meaning that Venezuelan migrants now make up more than 15% of their population. The large influx of migrants to these countries in a relatively short period of time has created a multitude of issues, including the rise of xenophobia among citizens of these countries and significant challenges for the receiving governments and institutions. There also is a lack of employment opportunities for the Venezuelan migrants who arrive in these countries, especially since most have dealt with slow economies, an inadequate amount of employment, poverty and inequality, and corrupt governments themselves. If Maduro remains in power and no significant change occurs in Venezuela to prevent the outflow of migrants and the humanitarian crisis within the country, the United Nations estimates that there will be up to 7.5 million Venezuelans who have left the country and live in the surrounding region by the end of 2020.⁴

³ “Understanding the Venezuelan Refugee Crisis.” [Wilson Center](#), 2019.

⁴ “Understanding the Venezuelan Refugee Crisis.” [Wilson Center](#), 2019.

U.S. Responses and Policies Regarding the Crisis in Venezuela

Both Democrats and Republicans have virtually no argument as to who the U.S. should officially recognize as the legitimate leader of Venezuela. They agree that after opposition leader Juan Guaidó, who is the leader of the country's opposition-controlled National Assembly (the country's legislative) body, is now the rightful president of Venezuela. Venezuela's constitution says that the leader of the National Assembly is the temporary leader of the country if there is no legitimate president, and the United States, along with dozens of other countries, recognize the last presidential election in 2018 as illegitimate and rigged in favor of Maduro's re-election. U.S. officials, including President Trump and **Secretary of State Mike Pompeo** have said that the country's National Assembly is the country's only democratically elected-body and that Maduro is a dictator with no legitimate claim to power. The U.S. government has acknowledged Juan Guaidó's legitimate re-election as President of the National Assembly in January 2020.⁵

U.S. foreign policy regarding the crisis in Venezuela has taken the form of aid and sanctions. This has been a mostly bipartisan effort among U.S. policymakers. The U.S. has committed \$568 million since 2017 to the Venezuelan crisis, including \$472 million in humanitarian aid in Venezuela and in the surrounding countries that have taken in most of the Venezuelan migrants. In September 2019, Secretary Pompeo announced an additional \$119 million in humanitarian assistance. The **U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)** is largely responsible for providing the necessary medical and health support, water, food, and nutritional needs inside Venezuela, as well as food, shelter, water, and legal assistance to those who have been forced to flee their country.

Where policymakers tend to disagree is on the matter of **sanctions**. Since the onset of the crisis in 2014, the U.S. has imposed at least 144 sanctions on Venezuelan or Venezuelan-connected individuals and revoked visas of hundreds of individuals and their families. There have also been sanctions placed on the state oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela, the government, and the country's central bank. Sanctions on individuals freeze any **assets** held by those individuals in the United States and prevent them from engaging with U.S. companies. There has been bipartisan support in Congress for sanctions on individuals, who are cited as corrupt Maduro-regime officials, but there is disagreement on the effects of economic and governmental sanctions. Those in support say that they are useful tools in dislodging Maduro from power, but those in opposition state that the sanctions have been unsuccessful in removing Maduro from power so far and instead exacerbate the humanitarian crisis by making it more difficult for Venezuelans to receive the supplies and basic services they need.⁶ The official policy of the U.S. is to restore democratic rule in Venezuela as a means of halting the migration crisis.⁷

⁵ "Why thousands of protesters – and Trump – are demanding Venezuela's president step down." [Vox](#), 2019.

⁶ "Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions." [Congressional Research Service](#), 2020.

⁷ "The United States Increases its Contribution in Response to the Venezuelan Regional Crisis." [USAID](#), 2019.

Migration Crisis in Central America

Migration flows from Central America and Mexico to the United States have steadily increased since 2011. Mexico continues to be the primary country of origin for migrants entering the United States, but an increasingly greater number are coming from Central American countries, namely those in the **Northern Triangle**. The Northern Triangle is made up of three countries: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.⁸ A multitude of factors have caused hundreds of thousands to leave the Northern Triangle countries, most of whom seek to come to the United States. Violence, drought and erratic weather (linked to climate change), corruption, weak rule of law, poor governance, and overall instability are making it near-impossible for many to live in those countries. Wealth disparity and high levels of economic inequality have plagued the region for decades. The wide variety of factors motivating individuals and families to leave Central America for the United States has caused **mixed migration**, with some seeking greater economic opportunity and the chance for a stable livelihood, and having virtually no choice but to leave their country origin because they are fleeing persecution, refuge from violence, and extreme food insecurity.

Some describe the Northern Triangle countries as **failed states**. They have some of the highest homicide rates in the world, with El Salvador experiencing 83 violent deaths in every 100,000, Guatemala 27 in 100,000, and Honduras 57 in every 100,000. Femicide and rape is also widespread in the region. Much of the violence can be attributed to the fact that this region of the world is home to the “world’s largest cocaine market.”⁹ This drug trafficking conducted by powerful gangs and criminal organizations, like Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the Eighteenth Street Gang (M-18), has increased the homicide rates in the region and created turf wars, where the groups violently battle for regional control. Locals are then forced to adhere to the gangs’ rules and pay their “taxes,” or face violence and/or death. Youth are especially susceptible to recruitment in these gangs due to the lack of legitimate employment opportunities, food scarcity, and lack of strong government institutions in the region. The gangs have also sought to intimidate and infiltrate government institutions, which have already been wrought with widespread corruption, bribery, and embezzlement of government funds.

Land ownership and economic power has been concentrated in the hands of elites in the Northern Triangle countries for years. This has caused low educational attainment over the years, persistent poverty, wealth inequality, and social instability. It also limits the government’s ability to protect citizens from violence and gangs, and its ability to prevent and prosecute crimes. An unfortunate addition to this list of factors that cause migration from these Northern Triangle countries is their susceptibility to natural disasters and drought. El Salvador and Guatemala are among the 15 countries in the world most at risk from natural disaster due to frequent exposure and the government’s weak response capacity. Repeated droughts have made it difficult to grow crops, thereby causing increased food insecurity for a population

⁸ “Central and North America and the Caribbean.” [IOM](#), 2020.

⁹ “Aid Cuts Won’t Slow Central America’s Exodus.” [U.S. News](#), 2019.

who already faces high levels of poverty.¹⁰ Many in this region see no other option but to leave their country for the United States due to the multitude of complex socioeconomic and security factors mentioned above. While the Central American countries face the same issues that force migration, the root causes of migration do vary not just by country, but by region and locality within those countries, making it impossible to find a single solution for promoting stability, economic growth, and halting the flow of migration in the region.

U.S. Responses and Policies Regarding Central American Migration

U.S. foreign and domestic policy related to the Central American migration crisis has been a complicated and contentious topic in American politics, especially since President Trump's election in 2016. The Trump administration and most Republican policymakers seek to minimize the number of migrants that arrive at the U.S.-Mexico border and the number of asylum applications that are approved each year. Since President Trump took office, a number of **executive orders** and policies have been enacted in efforts to curb migration from Central America and Mexico and as a means of handling the overwhelming number of migrants who are waiting at the border. Some of the most notable and controversial actions taken under the Trump administration and the **zero tolerance policy** have been the separation of families at the U.S.-Mexico border and the increased number of **detention centers** that hold migrants while they wait for the decision on their asylum applications.

Most recently, the Supreme Court temporarily upheld the Trump administration's decision in 2019 to enact the "**Safe 3rd Country Rule**" on migrants who are seeking asylum in the U.S. The policy did not go through Congress for approval, but the Supreme Court approved the Trump administration's claim that it was made in an emergency situation. This rule mandates that asylum seekers must apply for asylum in the first country that they pass through on their way to the U.S., making it impossible for anyone except those who are from Mexico to apply for asylum. Under this rule, migrants have increasingly been arrested at **ports of entry** when trying to cross the border and sent back to Mexico to await the outcome of their asylum applications. Others are denied the opportunity to seek asylum before U.S. immigration judges before they are deported. Furthermore, asylum-seekers that must wait in Mexico face the dangers of kidnapping, sexual assault, overcrowded shelters, and almost no temporary employment opportunities.¹¹ They also have difficulty finding the lawyers they need to get their asylum cases approved. 100,000 migrants were taken into custody at the southern border for four months in a row in mid-2019.¹²

There have also been changes in the aid that the U.S. gives to Central American countries, namely those in the Northern Triangle, since President Trump took office. In 2016, Congress approved \$750 million in aid for Central America. This aid sought to tackle the weak institutions and poor governance that plague

¹⁰ "Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy." [Congressional Research Service](#), 2019.

¹¹ "The Supreme Court has delivered a devastating blow to the US asylum system." [Vox](#), 2019.

¹² "Trump Administration Implementing 'Safe 3rd Country' Rule on Migrants Seeking Asylum." [NPR](#), 2019.

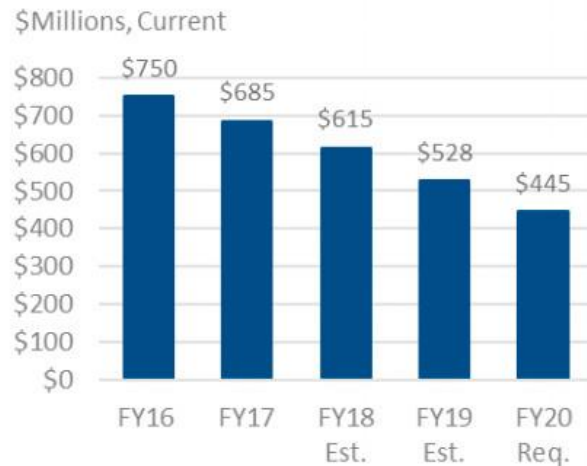
the region, along with the security and economic issues that reinforce them. While under President Trump the United States continues to provide aid for Central American countries, the amount provided has steadily decreased. Aid under the Trump administration has been more focused on preventing migration, cracking down on narcotics trafficking, improving security, and creating a more favorable environment for U.S. investment. There has been less pressure under these programs for the governments of Central American countries to tackle corruption. Since the time period between the Obama-era and Trump-era policies has been so short, it is difficult to evaluate which one has been most successful in alleviating some of the root causes of mass migration in the region.¹³

Furthermore, in 2019 Trump sought to cut all aid to Central America. This would cut all the funds that sponsor the work of USAID and **Alliance for Prosperity** in the region. Experts say that cutting aid will only cause more instability and force more migration, but some argue that the aid has failed to work thus far anyway.¹⁴

Subcommittee Background

The subcommittee on Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights and Global Women’s Issues is responsible for handling all matters concerning U.S. relations with countries of the Western Hemisphere, including Canada, Mexico, Central and South America, Cuba, and the other countries in the Caribbean, as well as the **Organization of American States**. Regionally, this subcommittee is responsible for dealing with all matters in the geographic region, including terrorism and **non-proliferation**, crime and illicit narcotics, U.S. foreign assistance programs, and the promotion of U.S. trade and exports. Globally, this subcommittee is responsible for dealing with matters transnational crime, trafficking in persons (also known as modern slavery or human trafficking,) global narcotics flows, civilian security, democracy, human rights, and global women’s issues.¹⁵ This subcommittee is comprised of a chairman and ranking member, four Republican majority members with

Figure 2. Appropriations for the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: FY2016-FY2020



Sources: U.S. Department of State, Congressional Budget Justifications for Foreign Operations, Fiscal Years 2017-2020; and H.Rept. 116-9.

¹³ “How to address the causes of the migration crisis, according to experts.” [Vox](#), 2019.

¹⁴ “Aid Cuts Won’t Slow Central America’s Exodus.” [U.S. News](#), 2019.

¹⁵ Subcommittees: United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.” About | United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, n.d. <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/about/subcommittees/>.



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three Democratic minority members. Sen. **Marco Rubio** (R) of Florida holds the title of chairman, while Sen. **Ben Cardin** (D) of Maryland holds the title of ranking member. The other members of the Republican majority are Senators **Rob Portman** of Ohio, **Ted Cruz** of Texas, **Cory Gardner** of Colorado, and **John Barrasso** of Wyoming. The Democratic minority includes Senators **Tom Udall** of New Mexico, **Jeanne Shaheen** of New Hampshire, and **Tim Kaine** of Virginia. Regarding recent legislation, this subcommittee has introduced and amended a bill that outlines and enacts sanctions on Venezuela regarding corruption and undemocratic actions, as well as those prohibiting the Maduro government's ability to trade gold, finance debt, or use cryptocurrencies to avoid U.S. sanctions. This bill, S. 1025 was incorporated into Public Law 116-94 in December 2019 and a new bill S. 2977, introduced in December 2019, if passed would extend the sanctions through December 2021.¹⁶

Subcommittee Charge

The goal of the subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights and Global Women's Issues is to draft a measured response to the ongoing migration crises in the Western Hemisphere. The subcommittee should acknowledge the root causes of these migration crises and the effectiveness of current policies in place in adequately addressing the crises. Senators should pry expert witnesses to gain an understanding of the role various countries and actors play in these crises, what new policies or revised policies would better address the crises, and what can be done to cut the number of migrants fleeing their homes in South and Central America. Senators should also gain an understanding of the critical issues relevant to this issue and potential solutions. Expert witnesses should be prepared to provide Senators with relevant knowledge and policy recommendations. Expert witnesses should also be prepared to answer Senators' questions regarding their expertise in the field and nuanced understanding of the issue at hand.

¹⁶ "Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions." [Congressional Research Service](#), 2020.



Questions to Consider

1. What are some of the root causes of migration in Venezuela?

2. What are some of the root causes of migration in Central America, most notably in the Northern Triangle countries?

3. What role has the U.S. played in the Venezuelan economic and humanitarian crisis?

4. What are the similarities and differences in U.S. policy regarding the crises in Venezuela and in Central America?

5. What some potential solutions in solving the root causes of the migration crisis in Central America? Are there any viable bipartisan solutions?

6. What would the person in your assigned role for this program recommend as a foreign policy solution to both of these migration crises?

Glossary of Terms

Term	Description
Alliance for Prosperity	Launched in 2014, the Alliance for Prosperity was a U.S. bid to curb migration from the “Northern Triangle” of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras by strengthening economic growth and funding security programs.
Assets	Property owned by a person or company, regarded as having value and available to meet debts, commitments, or legacies.
Asylum	The right to be recognized as a refugee and receive legal protection and material assistance. An asylum seeker must demonstrate that his or her fear of persecution in his or her home country is well-founded. Someone who is seeking asylum is deciding to seek a legal right to reside in a new country. (see definition of refugee)
Autocracy	A system of government by one person with absolute power.
Country of origin	The home country of a migrant.
Detention centers	A place where people who have entered the country illegally are kept for a period of time. The Trump Administration has come under scrutiny for how detained migrants are treated, especially those children who have been separated from their families, in these centers.
Executive orders	A rule or order issued by the president to an executive branch of the government and having the force of law.
Failed States	A state whose political or economic system has become so weak that the government is no longer in control.
Hyperinflation	Hyperinflation is a term to describe rapid, excessive, and out-of-control price increases in an economy. While inflation is a measure of the pace of rising prices for goods and services, hyperinflation is rapidly rising inflation.
Investment	The expenditure or use of money and capital in order to gain profitable returns as interest, income, or appreciation in value.
Mixed migration	The cross-border movements of people including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking and people seeking better lives and opportunities.
Non-proliferation	The prevention of an increase or spread of something, especially the number of countries possessing nuclear weapons.
Northern Triangle	El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.
Organization of American States	Organization formed to promote economic, military, and cultural cooperation among its members, which include almost all of the independent states of the Western Hemisphere. Similar to the United Nations.
Port of entry	A specific place where a person can lawfully enter a country. In the U.S., ports of entry are generally attended to by staff and security personnel who perform tasks such as: Checking travel and immigration documents such as passports and visas.
Refugee	Someone who has been forced to flee their country because of persecution, war, and violence due to their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. Most likely, they are unable to return to their home country or are afraid to do so. This technically does not include those who are fleeing a lack of employment opportunities or a lack of basic human necessities such as food, water, healthcare, and education.
Safe 3 rd Country Rule	A rule that went into effect in 2019 that makes migrants crossing the southern border ineligible for asylum in the United States if they pass through another country on the way



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	here. There are three exceptions to the rule: 1) Transit countries that are not parties to certain international treaties, 2) Victims of human trafficking, and 3) People who have applied for asylum in a third country and been rejected.
Sanctions	Economic sanctions are defined as the withdrawal of customary trade and financial relations for foreign- and security-policy purposes. Sanctions may be comprehensive, prohibiting commercial activity with regard to an entire country, or they may be targeted, blocking transactions by and with particular businesses, groups, or individuals.
Salient	Something of notable significance that is well-known to a large population of people.
Secretary of State Pompeo	The Secretary of State, appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate, is the President's chief foreign affairs adviser. The Secretary carries out the President's foreign policies through the State Department and the Foreign Service of the United States
U.S. Agency for International Development	Also known as USAID, it is the independent federal agency that manages U.S. foreign economic and humanitarian assistance programs around the world.
Zero tolerance policy	Policy toward illegal border crossing intended both to discourage illegal migration into the United States and to reduce the burden of processing asylum claims. All adult migrants are apprehended crossing the border illegally, with no exception for asylum seekers or those with minor children.