DEVELOPMENT POLICY ESSAY

Benjamin Meier
MAS ETH Development and Cooperation | NADEL, ETH Zürich | May 2018

_____

CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRATION TO AND FROM THE U.S. UNDER THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

Executive Summary

The increasing number of undocumented migrants from Central America, making their way through Mexico to the U.S. has given rise to a humanitarian catastrophe. In 2014, tens of thousands of children and families from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – known as the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) – arrived at the U.S. south border seeking protection and a safe place to live. Many of these migrants were fleeing extreme violence in their home country including organized crime, extortion, forced recruitment into criminal groups, sexual and gender-based violence, and violence against children. While such problems have existed for decades, conditions have worsened in recent years. Today, NTCA countries continue to experience generalized violence, with homicide rates several times higher than what the World Health Organization considers "epidemic" homicide level[*].

Despite the fact that most of the migrants are fleeing from life-endangering violence in their home countries, the U.S. largely treats them as a national security menace and as a justification for tougher border controls. More so, since Donald Trump became president of the U.S. in January 2017. Immigration was the centrepiece of his presidential campaign and it has remained a top priority on his political agenda. Within his first days in office, he signed an executive order on border security and interior enforcement, restraining the rights of immigrants and refugees. Until today, President Trump has signed seven executive orders related to immigration and at the time this essay is written, he announced plans to deploy US military forces to protect the U.S. border with Mexico.

Unlike other presidencies, who largely addressed immigration as a positive force and as part of the U.S. DNA, the Trump administration intends to restrict immigration and maximize enforcement. These new policies are unprecedented in its radicality and break from earlier history. On top, the new Trump administration has since the beginning relied on hateful rhetoric against migrants and intent to criminalize them through politically biased labels (e.g. "illegal") or wrong generalization ("rapists", "they (migrants) are bringing drugs"). Hence, the Trump administration is not only threatening migrants' rights in the U.S. but is highly influencing how immigration is perceived and discussed within the country.

Donald Trump's message that undocumented migrants will be faced with more difficulties to enter the U.S. also made its way south and has been heard by NTCA citizen. However, evidence suggests that hard line border control policies have not stopped Central American migrants fleeing their countries. Instead, they have very likely condemned Central American migrants to more precarious routes. At the same time, the new policies have also changed the human smuggling trade at the border. While so-called

---

[*] According to Insight Crime, in 2017 the number of violent deaths in El Salvador was 60 per 100'000 inhabitants, 43 in Honduras and 26 in Guatemala. Rates of violent death above ten per 100,000 are considered "epidemic".

"coyotes" used to work alone or in small family-run networks, a recent increase in price of crossing the border has attracted Mexican Drug Cartels to move in. As these criminal networks increasingly see migrants as an alternative, highly profitable revenue source an already dangerous journey has become even more dangerous, putting tens of thousands of migrants at great risk of being abused, kidnapped, extorted or killed.

On the other hand, President Trump's plan to crack down on undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. and to lift existing migrant protection programs (such as TPS and DACA) may result in mass deportation of Central American Migrants to their home countries and likely exacerbate the misery and instability that have driven the surge of migrants heading to the U.S. in recent years. It also means that the U.S. is unable to learn from its own history, as the MS-13 and Barrio 18 (Central America's largest and most violent street gangs) is a direct consequence of a previous mass deportation from the U.S. to Salvador during the 90ies and seen as a major cause for the current humanitarian catastrophe.

The new catalogue of immigration policies put forward by the Trump administration clearly breaks with former U.S. immigration policies. They may be in line with the administrative new "America First" strategy but it also demonstrates President Trump's over-simplistic view on how to deal with complex situations. Trump's migration policies cannot only worsen the current migration crisis and put the migrants in greater danger, there is also a high likelihood that they are self-defeating and may further destabilize NTCA countries, just after initial improvements have been achieved.

Table of contents

Table of contents

Glossary

NTCA	Northern Triangle Countries of America (including El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala).
CBP	Custom and Border Protection: An agency of the U.S. government that belongs to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and operates at the border and entry points of the U.S.
ICE	Immigrations and Custom Enforcement: An agency of the U.S. government that belongs to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) that is charged with carrying out detentions and deportations of undocumented migrants.
DACA	Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals: A program established by former president Obama that allows certain individuals, who entered the U.S. as minors without legal permission, to receive a renewable two-year period of deferred action from deportation and to be eligible for a work permit.
TPS	Temporary protected status: A program established by former president Obama, to allow nationals from ten countries affected by armed conflict or natural disaster, to live and work in the United States for limited times.
COMAR	Commission for Refugee Assistance (Mexico): The official government body in charge to process asylum petitions.
INM	National Institute of Migration (Mexico): An agency of the Secretariat of the Interior that controls and supervises migration in the country, who is charged with detaining and deporting irregular migrants back to Central America.
Asylum Seeker	A person who has left their country seeking protection but has yet to be recognized as a refugee. While the asylum claim is being examined, the asylum seeker must not be forced to return to their country of origin.
Migrant	A person who moves from one country to another to live and usually to work, either temporarily or permanently, or to be reunited with family members. Regular migrants are foreign nationals who, under domestic law, are entitled to stay in the country.
Undocumented Migrant	A person of foreign citizenship whose migration status does not comply with the requirements of domestic immigration legislation and rules. They are sometimes also called "illegal migrants", however this is technically incorrect as the term "illegal" refers only to a person's entry or stay, not the person itself.
Trump Effect	An expected slowdown of undocumented Central American migrants to the U.S. due to President Trump's policy changes.
Coyote	A colloquial Mexican–Spanish term referring to smugglers who facilitate the migration of people across the Mexican - U.S. border.
Southern Border Program (SBP)	A program launched in 2014 by the Mexican government and largely financed by the US government to better protect migrant's right and regulate Central American migration. In reality, it has mainly increased security operations and led to much higher number of apprehensions of northbound migrants.

"When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending the best. They're sending people that have lots of problems and they're bringing those problems. They're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime. They're rapists and some, I assume, are good people, but I speak to border guards and they're telling us what we're getting." Candidate Donald Trump, Announcement Speech for his Candidacy for President, June 2015

"We have people coming into the country or trying to come in – we are stopping a lot of them. You wouldn't believe how bad these people are. These aren't people, these are animals, and we are taking them out of the country at a level and at a rate that's never happened before." President Donald Trump, Roundtable Discussion on Immigration Policies in White House, May 2018

1. The changing Face of Latin American Migration

One of the world's busiest migration corridors runs from Central America through Mexico to the U.S. According to the International Migration Report (2017), around thirteen million Mexicans live in the US representing the second largest diaspora in the world after India's. Alongside the Mexicans, there are 1.5 million migrants from the countries of the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) which includes Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. While migration by Mexican nationals has been decreasing over the last years, migration from the NTCA has increased sharply. Particularly the surge of unaccompanied children and families (usually consisting of woman with one or more children) in 2014 has brought new attention on the Central American migration and to a region that has become the world's most violent not being at war (Crisis Group, 2016). Unlike the typical border crosser from the 1990ies and 2000s, who either tended to be male and of working age seeking employment or was driven by the desire of family reunifications, the recent increase of migration from Central America is mainly caused by flight from life-endangering violence in their home countries (Carper, 2016). Thus, over the past decades, there has been a change in characteristics of who is arriving at the border and the underlying reasons for making the decision to migrate.

Reduced migration by Mexican nationals

Mexican apprehensions on the US border have decreased dramatically. While in fiscal year 2000, over 1.6 million Mexicans were apprehended, this number dropped to 130'000 in FY 2017. Today, the number of Mexican immigrants leaving the United States to return home is greater than the number trying to enter. Among others, there are two major reasons that have led to this shift in dynamic. First, Mexico's own economy has improved, and growing opportunities there have motivated many who once migrated to return home. Simultaneously, the US economy now supports far fewer construction and manufacturing jobs than it did in the 90ies and 2000s, and those were a mainstay of the Mexican migrant community. Second, because of Mexico's slowing population growth, its youth feels less compelled to leave for the U.S. and look for better job opportunities (Carper, 2016).

Increased migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America

The latest apprehension numbers from the US Customer and Border Protection (CBP) suggest that more migrants from countries other than Mexico – predominantly individuals from Central America – continue to arrive at the U.S. border at an elevated rate. In the beginning, the majority of the undocumented migrants were single adults, mostly males. This is still true, but as Central Americans in the Northern Triangle are facing the worst violence ever recorded in history, there is a growing number of unaccompanied children, particularly girls, and families making the journey to the US. Unlike their precursors, who tried to cross the border as undocumented migrants, unaccompanied minors and families have not necessarily been trying to evade the agents patrolling the border, but surrendered to ask for asylum (Carper, 2016). The United Nations High Commission on Refugees (2015) has documented that asylum claims from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador in the US increased sharply since 2009. Just in the period between 2010 (5886) and 2014 (25'989), the number more than quadrupled.

This shows that the face of Latin American Migration to the U.S. is changing. However, President Trump's rhetoric and the focus of U.S. immigration policies suggest that Mexicans entering the U.S. without authorization are the principal challenge facing policymakers. Although former President Obama stepped up border control and began more strictly to enforce immigration laws and expanded its use of deportations – returning over 5 million people in total – his administration also welcomed legal migrants, recognized the extraordinary circumstances posed by unaccompanied children and families from NTCA and extended support to refuges (Crisis Group, 2017a). By contrast, President Trump was elected in part because of his hard line on immigration. Less than a week after his inauguration, he signed an executive order on border security, stating that the continued illegal immigration at the Nations Southern Border presents a clear and present danger to the interests of the United States (Trump, 2017). Further, one of Trump administration's flagship project is the construction of a wall along the U.S.-Mexican border. While it is still unclear whether this project will ultimately be realised, what is certain is that many of Trump administration's policies on border security and migration will impact thousands of migrants from NTCA who are fleeing extreme violence and many of who – under international law - are eligible to receive refugee status in the US.

This report will look how changes in U.S. policies under the Trump administration impact Central American migration. Second, it looks what potential consequences the new U.S. policies may have on the people who decide to leave their home country and journey north. Third, it analysis possible risks and costs for the sending countries. The final section will then provide recommendations what the different governments can do to increase protection for Central American migrants fleeing violence in their homelands.

2. Shift of U.S. migration policies under the Trump Administration

U.S. policies on migration have undergone a massive change since the inauguration of Donald Trump on January 2017. Within his first year, the president has signed seven executive orders related to immigration. Unlike other presidencies, who largely addressed immigration as a positive force for the economy and as a part of the country's own heritage, the Trump administration has assented sharp cuts to legal immigration. Particularly the radicality and undifferentiated application of his orders are unprecedented and break from earlier history (Pierce & Selee, 2017). As the Trump administration has set in motion a range of significant changes, not all policy shifts are targeted at the Latino Migration (e.g. ban on entries of nationals from eight predominantly Muslim countries). Yet, many of them do and have significant consequences not only for coming migrants but also for the Latin Diaspora living in the U.S. Hereinafter, a summary of relevant policies that have changed in the year since the election:

Enhanced Immigration Enforcement

In 2014, the Obama administration issued guidelines for deporting undocumented migrants that placed highest priority on gang members, felons and those who posed national security threats. The idea of these guidelines was to concentrate limited resources on the most serious cases and to avoid infringement of the proportionality principle. However, according to the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), which advocates for harsher U.S. immigration policies, the Obama guidelines translated into de facto protections for undocumented migrants. Unless someone fell into the high-priority categories which meant being an active gang-member or felon, the chance of being deported was virtually zero (Kulish, et al., 2017).

The Trump administration has now removed these priorities to include people who do not specifically have criminal records or pose a danger to society. Hence, under this executive order, the government will "not exempt classes or categories of removal aliens from potential enforcement" (DHS, 2017). In practice this means that Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE) can now deport anyone charged with or convicted of any criminal offense, even minor ones like shoplifting or passing a red light (Kulish, et al., 2017). These changes have dramatic consequences for many undocumented Latin American migrants. Nonetheless, that they have been living in the U.S. for many years, they now may become a prime target for deportation. In an interview with the NY Times, an undocumented immigrant commented worriedly "I have been living in the country for 25 years; we have our whole lives here; our children are U.S. citizen; but now, I don't know if I can go out, if I should drive" (Kulish, et al., 2017).

In addition to the weakening of the rules of who can be deported, the new executive order includes several other changes to interior enforcement. One of the most controversial and far-reaching for the Central American community in the U.S. is the prosecution of parents who pay for their children to be smuggled across the border. Not only is this new policy challenging a center piece of the US immigration

system (family reunification has been a priority in immigration laws since 1965) but criminalizes parents who pay smugglers in the search to increase the safety of their children in an already dangerous journey (Pierce & Selee, 2017).

Detention of migrants

Under the Obama administration, undocumented migrants were often released into the U.S. while their request for asylum was processed. As the U.S. is facing an immigration backlog of more than 600'000 cases – or more than 2000 pending cases for every immigration judge – it could take years before a decision is made. By that time, the immigrant has already been living somewhere in the US which makes it difficult for authorities to find and eventually deport him, as most of the requests are denied (Kulish, et al., 2017).

The Trump administration has declared an end to the so-called "catch and release" policy, by building new detention facilities and locking up migrants, including families and children, until the decision is made. According to a report from Amnesty International (2017), there are plans to double existing immigration detention center's capacity from 34'000 to 68'000 beds. Under current policy, families should be kept intact, while waiting for a decision. The Trump administration however is currently considering a new policy to separate children from their parents by sending the parents to an adult detention facility, while their children would be placed in a juvenile center or with a "sponsor" that could be a relative living in the U.S. This new policy is still to be approved by the new Homeland Security Secretary, but a recent article in the NY Times by Dickerson & Ron (2017) indicates that the new policy already has many supporters in the White House and is likely to be signed off.

Vetting and Obstacles for Legal Immigration

To fulfill a campaign promise, the Trump administration has increased border security procedures and migrants must now fill out supplemental questionnaires and are even asked for their usernames on all social media accounts within the last five years. (Pierce & Selee, 2017) The process to apply for asylum has always been complicated but with the new rules, it makes it even harder. But the new policies and guidelines issued by the Trump administration is just one part of the obstacles migrants face when applying for asylum. There are indications that the harsh rhetoric on immigrants employed by the President and his supports, particularly on Latin American migrants, has had effects on the behavior of individuals, among them, ICE and CPB officers. As the Trump administration strongly encourages to reject and to refer applicants for immediate deportation, the responsibility to carefully asses every case gets weakened and likewise the hurdle to reconsider an application in the case of a doubt or missing information is low. In theory, every asylum seeker should have the opportunity to present his case before an immigration judge. According to the American Immigration Lawyers Association (2017), less than one out of five people facing deportation get a hearing before an immigration judge. A vast majority of all removals bypassed court altogether through the application of "expedited removal" that give

enforcement agents unilateral authority to deport. This fast-track method has been introduced two decades ago, but in practice has only narrowly been used by previous governments due to concerns about constitutional rights. The new administration however has campaigned to use "expedited removal" as extensively as the original law permits it. (Kulish, et al., 2017)

Ending DACA and TPS

During his presidency, Obama created two special programs that granted benefits to certain type of undocumented immigrants. This included a program known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) that gave work permits and temporary protection from deportation to roughly 750'000 migrants, who were brought to the U.S. as children (so called Dreamers). The second program, known as Temporary Protected Status (TPS), is a temporary form of humanitarian protection offered to nationals of certain countries that face violent conflict or suffer from natural disasters. Like the DACA program, the TPS offers provisional protection against removal and permission to work in the U.S. (Pierce & Selee, 2017)

The Trump administration has signaled to limit the benefits from these programs. Given the large share of Latin American beneficiaries, the discontinuation of the programs will be another setback for migrants from the NTCA as much for undocumented migrants living in the U.S. who will most likely lose their work authorization and no longer be protected from removal as for future migrants who flee from violence and crime and are no longer entitled to receive provisional protection.

In sum, no administration in modern U.S. history has placed such a high priority on immigration policies. Many of the introduced policies are unprecedented in its radicality and mark a major shift in how immigration is discussed and perceived in the U.S. What is more, President Trump pictures a decontextualized, dramatized vision of immigrants as being criminals and subtracts any notion of these individuals as human beings with social ties and with social values. During a roundtable discussion on immigration policies at the White House in May 2018, he even went as far as calling undocumented migrants "animals" ("These aren't people. These are animals", CNN, 2018). He demonstrates a total lack of empathy towards people in need and an alarming contemptuous attitude towards migrants. Consequently, the U.S. immigration policies under the Trump administration have become almost exclusively focused on restricting immigration and maximizing enforcement.

3. The Impact on Migration Flow

President Trump's threat to deport more immigrants and to tackle illegal migrations did not remain unheard in the NTCA and caused anxiety among its citizen. Major newspaper in the region published numerous articles about the political discourse in the U.S and its likely consequences for the Northern Triangle countries. In early 2017, U.S. government-near media coined a so-called "Trump effect", highlighting that fewer people are migrating north as a result of President Trump's though immigration rhetoric and focus on hard-line border security policies (Lajeunesse & Prabucki, 2017).

The numbers indeed showed a sharp drop in migrant apprehension at the U.S. south border after mid-January, indicating the fewer migrants were heading north. In April 2017 the number were even at a 17-year low with less than 16'600 immigrant apprehensions. Trump supporters, including Homeland Security Secretary John F. Kelly were quick to proclaim the recent numbers as a win for the Trump administration, saying the decrease in migrant apprehensions is "no accident." (Fears & Mongelli, 2017). However, many experts insisted that it is too early to identify what accounts for this dramatic dip. Indeed, after May 2017, apprehension levels have begun to tiptoe back up again and in February 2018 have reached a level that is somewhat at an average rate of the past years.

**Migrant Apprehensions at U.S. South Border, 2014-2018**
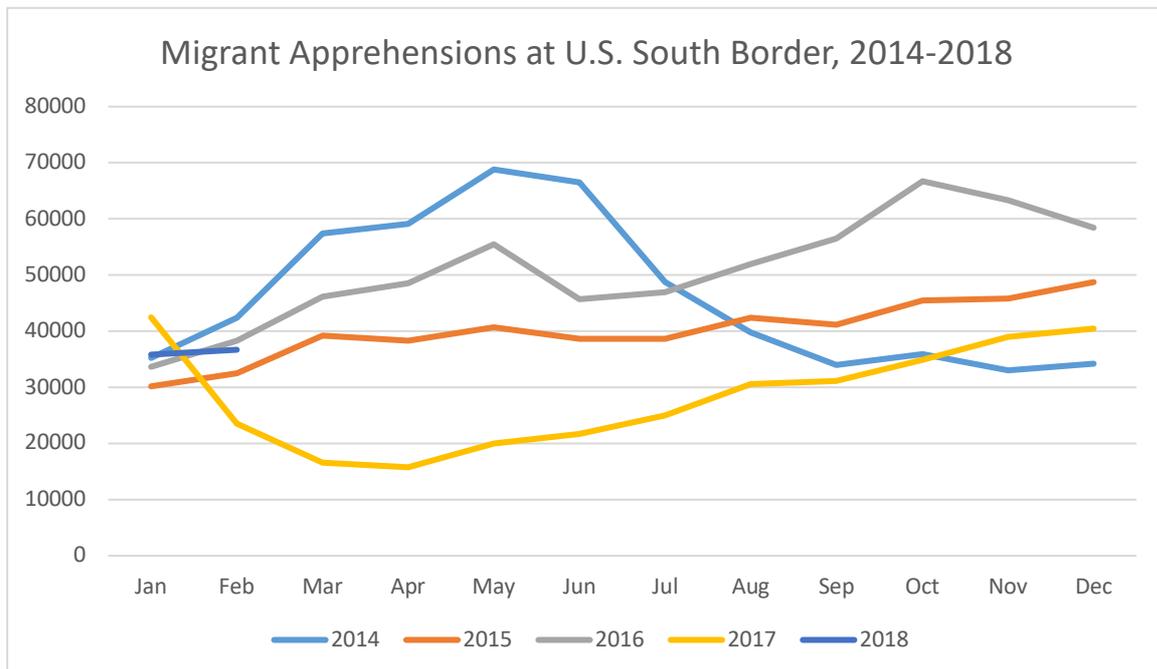
Source: Statistic, U.S. Custom and Border Protection, 2018

However, the chart also indicates a strong increase of migrant apprehensions during the second half of 2016, which suggests that Central Americans with a desire to leave their countries, were rushing to reach the U.S. before the inauguration of Donald Trump in January 2017. Although it is impossible to confirm the reason and there are many factors that influence the decision whether to migrate or not, there are indicators that support this assumption. First, apprehension levels in late 2016 almost hit the record from 2014 which was caused by rapid deterioration of the security situation in NTCA. Second, the migration patter from 2016 does not follow the typical migration patter of previous years.

After one year into presidency, the proclaimed "Trump effect" triggered by his restrictive migration control policies cannot be observed. On the contrary, the drop from early 2017 that was celebrated by the Trump administration and government-near media as a win, seems to be a correction to a long-term average after a temporary increase that was caused by the fear of him becoming president.

Migration from NTCA

While President Trump's rhetoric and focus remains on the Mexicans as the major challenge the U.S. is facing in terms of security and immigration, the reality as already discussed in previous chapter, is, that there has been a fundamental shift in U.S. immigration pattern. Northern Triangle immigrant population has grown sharply and since 2016, more migrants from Central America have been arriving at the U.S. South border than Mexicans. The significance of this numbers becomes even more clear when comparing the population of Mexico (131 millions) to the total population of NTCA (32 millions).
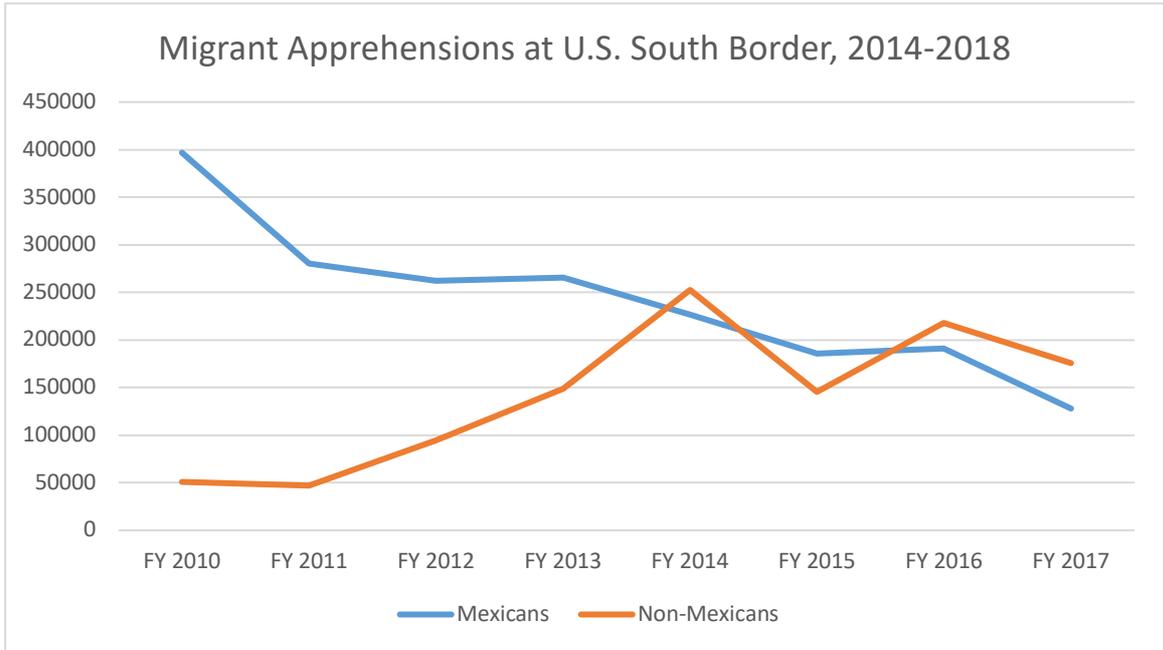
Source: Statistic, U.S. Custom and Border Protection, 2018

There are plenitudes of individual reasons why Central American migrants decide to leave their countries and look for a better life in the U.S. including better payed jobs to support family members, to join parents or relatives, or to seek seasonal work. Often it is a combination of several factors that eventually lead to the decision. However, several reports highlight that crime and violence is a key factor driving large numbers of Central American citizens to migrate to the U.S. (WOLA, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2017a/b; UNHCR, 2017)

Over the last 10 years, over 150'000 people have been killed in the NTCA. According to the UNODC statistics, El Salvador had the highest murder rate in the world with 109 homicides per 100'000 inhabitants (2015). After a truce between the two major street gangs (MS-13 and Barrio 18) collapsed in 2013, homicides rate sharply increased, doubling in two years. Although El Salvador made progress over the last years, bringing the rate down to 60 per 100'000 in 2017, it still ranks among the highest in the world and the security situation remains fragile. Further, despite the drop in homicide rate, according to a study conducted by InSight Crime (2018), only 12% of Salvadorans actually believe that crime has decreased in 2017 while more than 60% believe it has increased. Based on my personal experience in Guatemala, this misperception can be explained as every person knows someone within the larger family that has become a victim of crime. There is no other region with more attacks on public transport than in the NTCA countries. On average, there are about 120 armed attacks on the public transport system in Guatemala (Notimérica, 2016). So as long as a daily routine like taking a bus is accompanied with an uneasy feeling not to know if you are able to make it home that evening, official statistics have little impact on perception of crime levels.

In Honduras, urban centres like Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula face similar problems with street gangs. However, particularly along the Atlantic coast, it is also confronted with violence from drug cartels smuggling cocaine from South America to the U.S. Even so homicide rates have decreased between 2016 and 2017, it remains at the world's highest with 43 homicides per 100'000 inhabitants. Guatemala's homicide rate (26) is significantly lower than those of its two Northern Triangle neighbours, however, it is still seven times higher than the U.S. average (InSight Crime, 2018). Furthermore, NTCA demonstrates alarmingly growing rates of femicide. Between January and September 2017, more than 590 women were murdered in Guatemala, bringing the total femicides over the past nine years to a record figure of 7,273. (Ministerio Público de Guatemala, 2017). The term femicide refers not only to the fact that the victim was a woman but rather that the victim was killed because she was a woman and perceived to be at the bottom of a gender-based power structure (Portillo Villeda & Miklos, 2017). These homicide statistics are just one way of measuring the epidemic violence that people from NTCA countries are facing. Additionally, extortion is widespread, with small business, the public transportation sector and marginalized neighbourhoods being hit the most. Recent statistics show that Salvadorans pay an estimated $390 million a year in extortion fees (affecting roughly 70% of

all (micro)-businesses) while Hondurans pay around $200 million and Guatemalans an estimated $61 million. These figures may even be higher given that extortion is one of the most underreported crimes. Failure to pay can result in harassment, violence or death. (Dudley & Lohmuller, 2015)

Thus, countries of the Northern Triangle are faced with various pattern of violence, ranging from high levels of homicides, disappearances and forced recruitment into gangs to sexual exploitation of girls and women. This extraordinary epidemic of violence and the incapability of the state to protect their citizens, makes a diverse range of people to flee their homes and to seek protection in the U.S. Within this context, the current U.S. policy that is based on an aggressive deterrence strategy focused on the fast removal and repatriation of recent border crosser is not only misplaced but ineffective. As Jon Hiskey, the lead author of the American Immigration Council Report in an interview with InSight Crime states: "Violence and crime as a push factor is going to outweigh anything the U.S can do in terms of deterrence" (La Susa, 2016). This statement is underpinned by a migrant interview conducted by International Crisis Group (2016, p.8) who said: "Poverty was 'bearable', but you can't live in fear".

4. The Impact on Central American Migrants

While evidence suggests that hard-line border control policies do not stop Central American migrants fleeing their countries, they very likely condemn them to more precarious routes as they look to avoid being detained by border control agents. To increase their chance to get across the border, most migrants hire a migrant smuggler, called coyote. According to Mexico News Daily (2017), tariffs charged by coyotes went up from $3500 in November 2016 to $8000 in early 2017, under the argument that new policies in the U.S. made the illegal crossing riskier. Given that average minimal salary in the NTCA is less than $300 per month, with numerous people not even reaching that, many Central American migrants must go into debts to undertake that journey, more so with the current price increase. Traditionally, coyotes used to work independently or in small groups. Today, they are part of a larger structure and often work for Mexican cartels which has severe consequences for the individual migrant itself. First, migrants are forced to use the 'protection' service by the cartels. If a migrant tries to cross the border without paying, he risks getting beaten, kidnapped, or murdered. How many migrants suffer this fate because they cannot or will not pay for protection is unknown. (International Crisis Group, 2016). Second, the staggering increase of 130% in fees however may mean that more migrants will try to cross the border on their own, putting themselves at even greater risk, not only of being apprehended and deported but being murdered or kidnapped. Tightening U.S. policies are therefore likely to strengthen violent criminal networks which look to profit from the large numbers of undocumented migrants trying to enter the U.S. and result in an increased loss of human life. Consequently, undocumented migrants are condemned to find their way and navigate between the dual threats of law enforcement and violent criminal networks.

Central American migrants however do not only face an increased risk of being caught and deported at the border between Mexico and the U.S. but throughout whole Mexico. In July 2014, under the pressure of then president Obama, Mexico instituted the so-called Southern Border Program (SBP), which dramatically increased security operations to regulate the flow of migrants from the NTCA. The background of the initiative was the sharp increase in apprehension levels of unaccompanied children from the NTCA countries in 2014 who appeared at the U.S. south border. Although the program aimed at increasing coordination within Mexican agencies and with Central American governments and to protect migrants and guarantee respect for their human rights, in practice, the program mainly brought an increase in road checkpoints and Federal Police presence (Isacson, Meyer, & Smith, 2017). As a result, after the first year in operation, apprehension level grew from 97'245 to 174'159, representing an increase of 79 percent compared to the same period before its implementation. (Isacson et. al, 2017) Likewise, deportation of migrants from Central America rose by 68 per cent according to government statistics (SEGOB, 2018).

 "La Bestia" (the Beast), a cargo train that heads from southern Mexico all the way to the U.S. has long been the symbol of Latin American migration to the U.S. Images of its roofs being jammed with migrants made it into the media all around the world. However, an investigation from International Crisis Group (2016) shows, that la Bestia carries far fewer undocumented passengers today than three or four years ago. As Mexican police and migration agents monitor the route more closely, the ride has become riskier, and a last-resort option for the poorest travellers only. The fear is not without cause. A survey conducted by a network of civil society groups including 31'000 migrants found that 20 per cent mentioned that they had suffered various crimes at the hands of authorities, including robbery, extortion, beatings, sexual harassment and illegal detentions. While police, including federal forces, were most commonly accused of stealing, migration officials and members of the military (soldiers and marines) were largely accused of extortion. This "hunt down" of migrants has also prompted an underground economy at highly inflated prices. In the same study, migrants mentioned that drivers of taxis and local buses charge up to ten times the normal fare, which the migrants pay out of fear not to be turned over to migration agents (Crisis Group, 2016). Similar to strengthening border control, price increases provide little deterrence for people fleeing violence and persecution. Thus, migrants crossing Mexico have little choice: pool more resources for the more expensive journey which most likely means take on more debt or being condemned to take more dangerous routes and put their lives in greater danger.

Mexico – the U.S. gatekeeper

Although the Southern Border Program has been promoted as a mean to better protect migrants and guarantee respect for their human rights, investigation from Amnesty International (2018) showed that Mexico is failing in its responsibility to protect the increasing number of Central Americans migrants

in its country. In 2016, the National Institute of Migration (INM), which represents the federal body responsible for regulating migration through the country, detained 188'595 undocumented migrants, 81% of them being from Central America. Within the same year, they returned 147'370 to their countries of origin out of which 97% were from the NTCA countries. By law, the INM must inform any person they stop or detain of their right to seek asylum in Mexico and send those who express their intention to apply for asylum to the Comision Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (COMAR). Amnesty International discovered that 75% of migrants detained in immigration centers are misinformed by INM officers about their rights to seek asylum. Instead of being carefully listened to, more than half of the people spent less than 10 minutes in interviews. In several cases documented by Amnesty International (2017), even when the migrant explicitly asked to get asylum and expressed fear for their live in their home country, they were ignored and ultimately deported. As a Honduran migrant who was forcibly recruited as an orphan age 13 and is threatened by "his" gang for fleeing its rank said:

"I've been deported 27 times from Mexico. The Mexican migration agents don't care why you are leaving your county. They make fun of you." (Amnesty International, 2017, p.30)

This practice is called refoulement and is forbidden under the refugee convention by the UNHCR, which has been signed by many countries including Mexico. The INM bypasses the law by claiming that migrant**s** have signed a "voluntary return" paper. In their study, Amnesty International (2018) reports that many migrants have said that they were frequently pressured into signing this paper. A 23 old Honduran man mentioned:

"The INM official in the detention center said 'if you don't sign here, we won't give you food, you won't be able to have a shower. We will treat you like you don't exist." (Amnesty International, 2018, p.5)

These failures are more than simply negligent practices, but can put asylum seekers at great risks. Particularly in El Salvador and Honduras, Mara networks stretch across nearly all regions and deportation centres or highway drop-off points can easily be traced down by these organisations. Amnesty International (2017) documented a case of a Honduran migrant whose request for asylum has been declined by COMAR arguing that he had options for security in his home country. Three weeks after his deportation by INM, he was found murdered in Honduras.

These illegal deportations have already taken place for several years now and are not a direct consequence from the new U.S. immigration policies under the Trump administration. However, given that the new U.S. policies on immigration are going to extremes to encourage (fast) deportation, it is

unlikely that Mexico is going to change their own practice. Further, given the current tense relation between Mexico and the U.S., the Mexican government can use its cooperation with U.S. immigration policies as an asset to improve the current situation between the two countries.

In sum, the new deterrence policies by the U.S. combined with entrenched reckless practices in Mexico have made an already highly vulnerable group even more vulnerable and an already dangerous journey more dangerous. Migrants are forced to take more precarious routes or cooperating with criminal networks to avoid official obstacles but at the same time expose themselves to another set of severe danger.

5. The impact on sending countries

U.S. immigration policies do not only affect people who take the decision to immigrate to the U.S. but may also have an impact on the sending countries itself. This is particularly true for the NTCA countries as they are small, economically depended on the U.S. and have societies strongly enmeshed with their grand neighbour.

Security

The combination of enhanced immigration enforcement, weakening or lifting migrant protection programs such as TPS and DACA and a new focus on deterrence may result in mass deportation of Central American migrants to their home countries. Given that the Central American Diaspora in the U.S. accounts for over 3 million people, this can result in hundreds of thousands of repatriations to Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, if the U.S. policies will be implemented as rigorously as it has been promised by the Trump administration. Such an inflow of returnees, most of whom would be low-skilled and returning to economically deficient communities they have not visited or lived in for years, is likely to (re)exacerbate the current regional crisis of crime and violence, just after all three countries have seen falling homicide rates in recent months. This is, because street gangs as well as other organized crime groups that control many communities, would prey upon these vulnerable people, many of whom originally fled to escape exactly that fate (Zong & Batalova, 2015; Espach, 2017).

Mass deportation is also a highly sensitive and politically loaded topic in NTCA. It was the large-scale deportation of MS-13 gang members to El Salvador beginning in the 1990s, that helped turn the country into one of the most violent in the world. Many of these people had arrived in the U.S. as toddlers but never received secured legal residency or citizenship. To be part of a country that actively impeded their integration and in order to reduce their own vulnerability, they banded together. In the wake of the 1992 riots in Los Angeles (a series of riots and civil disturbances that occurred in LA after four police officers used excessive force and beating in the arrest of an Afro-American taxi driver), the LA Police

Department worked with immigration authorities to deport undocumented gang members. From 1993 to 1999, over 60'000 NTCA nationals were deported, of whom roughly one-third has been classified as criminals (Crisis Group, 2017b). After they were removed and sent back to their countries of origin, deportees were stigmatised by their host communities and authorities. Faced with scant access to school, limited social services and little economic perspective, they reproduced the structures and behaviour patterns that had provided them with support and security in the U.S. Thus they founded local chapters of their gang in their communities of origin. Today, the Maras are a transnational criminal network with tens of thousands of gang members that threaten NTCA countries' stability and compromise social cohesion (Rodgers, Muggah, & Stevenson, 2009). Over twenty years later, there is still often stigma associated with deported migrants. Local employers often see returned migrants as criminals and disregard the skills they might bring based on their work experience in the U.S. However, a lack of employment opportunities is likely to drive deported migrants into the informal economy and further into a vicious cycle of poverty and instability that may make them again an easy prey for criminal networks.

In recent years, all three countries have established legal frameworks to coordinate government agency's responses and resources for the deported migrant population. In addition, in a joint program with governmental agency and the private sector, Swisscontact is pioneering a reintegration program for deportees in El Salvador. The program's objective is to facilitate returnees – who possess profound working skills – finding a job and fight the cliché of criminal deportees. However, the biggest challenge to these frameworks and initiatives is the lack of sufficient funding to create programs, particularly those that provide longer-term attention to deported migrants.

Economy

Another central topic of concern for NTCA countries, is the significant reduction in remittances from the U.S. if deportation policies will be rigorously enforced. According to the Worldbank, remittances in 2016 accounted for 17% of El Salvador's and Honduras' GDP while in Guatemala it was 10%. This is significantly higher than other Latin American countries such as Bolivia (5%), Ecuador (2%), Colombia (1%) or Peru (1%). Thus, the effects of remittances are not negligible. During its annual conference in January 2018, the think tank Inter-American Dialogue mentioned that the overall economic growth experienced in 2017 can be attributed mostly to the growth in remittances. In NTCA countries, remittances may be responsible for half of the overall economic growth. Thus, the set of President Trump's policies that are targeted at the Central American Diaspora, and repatriating people living without official documents in the U.S., will threaten the future development of the NTCA countries.

The result from a survey to over 500 migrants found, that the majority of migrants continue to remit on patterns like previous years, but their remitting behaviour is now hampered by great fear of deportation and grave concern about a remittance tax (another instrument currently discussed by the Trump administration) (Orozco, 2017).

After the humanitarian crisis posed by unaccompanied children in 2014, President Obama persuaded Congress to approve more than \$750 million in development aid for Central America to fight root causes of migration (so-called Alliance for Prosperity program). President Trump on the other hand, asked for a 30% reduction in funding for Central America in his proposed 2018 budget to Congress. By discontinuing the Alliance for Prosperity program and at the same time increasing the number of deportees, President Trump ignores any historical context and runs the risk of undermining its own policy goals and committing the same errors made in the past, that in part has led to the destabilization of a whole region and the suffering of millions of people.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The flow of undocumented migrants from Central America to the U.S. is a complex phenomenon that cannot be solved by any one measure or few new immigration policies implemented by the Trump administration. The reasons for making a decision to leave one's home country are multifaceted and are unique to every migration story. In the context of Central America, however, fleeing extreme levels of violence has become a major reason for leaving the home country. Unlike earlier migration to the U.S., that predominantly has been driven in search of better jobs mainly by Mexicans, the current situation is characterized in many ways as a humanitarian crisis. Nonetheless, President Trump largely treats them as a national security menace and as a justification for tougher border controls. However, by forcing migrants underground, they become more vulnerable and an easy prey for corrupt officials or criminal networks. While the current data show that the number of Central Americans fleeing to the U.S. remains largely unchanged, the harsher policies have empowered criminal groups to traffic and exploit ever more desperate migrants.

Solving the complex situation of NTCA migration will require a multi-faceted response that addresses the root causes that force Central Americans to abandon their homes and not by cracking down on the already most vulnerable persons. What is needed is a mix of short-term and long-term responses. Short-term responses must include better protection of migrants and better safeguards to avoid existing

violation of international law such as non-compliance with the non-refoulment principle (both from the U.S. and Mexico). At the same time, it is inevitable to also invest in long-term actions to fight present socio-economic problems and the high levels of violence and insecurity in the NTCA countries.

More specifically, this includes:

To the President of the U.S.

- Stop making dehumanizing allegations about migrants and refrain from stigmatizing migrants by labelling them as "criminals", "rapists"
- Acknowledge the change in Latin American migration pattern and recognize Central American migration as a humanitarian crisis
- Publicly affirm that the U.S. is committed to international law and provides sanctuary to people seeking protection
- Provide extra funds to NTCA to promote economic prosperity, improve security situation and strengthen local governance in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala

To the US Government:

- Ensure that all U.S. laws and policies related to immigration are in accordance with obligations under international law
- Strengthen protection for undocumented migrants (particularly children) and consider opening a humanitarian corridor to protect the most vulnerable migrants and to fight human smuggling
- Strengthen immigration courts and make sure they are adequately staffed and financed to avoid lengthy delays and minimize time of legal uncertainty for migrants
- Make sure asylum claims are managed in a full and fair process with all procedural safeguards in place (such as provision of information, quality interpretation for migrants) and expedited removals remains narrowly used
- Deny funding for highly controversial policies such as new detentions centers (particularly separating children form their parents), border wall

To the Mexican Government:

- Investigate current deportation practices by the National Institute of Migration (INM) to prevent further illegal practices of refoulment
- Ensure protection of Central Americans when travelling through their country and renounce their complicity with the U.S. to act as a gatekeeper (in order to receive security funding like the South Border Program)
- Under all circumstances restrain from using Central American migrants as a collateral in U.S.-Mexican negotiations

To the Government of Guatemala, Honduras and Salvador:

- Take actions to pursue ending violence in their countries and introduce further protection mechanisms for people of high vulnerability
- Fight impunity by prosecuting and bringing to trial perpetrators (particularly also of femicide and violence against children)
- Adopt a whole-of-governance approach including all relevant ministries to effectively manage the challenges posed by the growing number of returnees
- Promote legal frameworks to help and facilitate deported people's reintegration in society and launch awareness campaigns to fight the cliché of criminal deportees.
- Create specific programs and protection mechanism for deported people in need of protection

To the private sector in Guatemala, Honduras and Salvador

- Stop stigmatizing deportees as criminals and start recognizing their labor skills as valuable assets for local economy instead
- Create special reintegration programs for deportees (e.g. through Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR) activities)

Literature

American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA). (2017). *Due Process Denied: Central Americans Seeking Asylum and Legal Protection in the United States*. Retrieved from http://www.aila.org/infonet/report-due-process-denied

Amnesty International. (2018). *Overlooked and under-protected: Mexico's deadly refoulement of Central Americans seeking asylum. Retrieved from https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/AMR4176022018-ENGLISH-05.pdf*

Amnesty International. (2017). *Facing Walls. USA and Mexico's violation of the rights of asylum seekers*. Retrieved from https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/USA-Mexico-Facing-Walls-REPORT-ENG.pdf

Carper, T. (2016). *Stronger Neighbours - Stronger Borders: Adressing the Root Causes of the Migration Surge from Central America*. Retrieved from https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo /media/doc/216290%20Stronger%20Neighbors.pdf

CNN (2018). *Trump: Breaking up families because of Dems (Video: 1:50)*. Retrieved from https://edition.cnn.com/videos/politics/2018/05/16/trump-immigration-roundtable-california-bts.cnn

Department of Homeland Security (DHS). (2017). *Fact Sheet: Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States*. Washington DC. Retrieved from https://www.dhs.gov/news/2017/02/21/fact-sheet-enhancing-public-safety-interior-united-states

Dickerson, C., & Nixon, R. (2017). *Trump Administration Considers Separating Families to Combat Illegal Immigration*. The New York Times. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/21/us/ trump-immigrant-families-separate.html

Dudley, S., & Lohmuller, M. (2015). *Northern Triangle is World's Extortion Hotspot*. InSight Crime. Retrieved from https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/northern-triangle-world-extortion-hotspot/

Espach, R. (2017). *Central America under Trump's shadow*. Geopolitical Intelligence Service. Retrieved from https://www.gisreportsonline.com/central-america-under-trumps-shadow,politics,2200.html

Fears, D., & Mongelli, L. (2017). *Why Central Americans are fleeing their violant homelands for the US*. New York Post. Retrieved from https://nypost.com/2017/04/13/why-central-americans-are-fleeing-their-violent-homelands-for-the-us/

InSight Crime (2018). *InSight Crime's 2017 Homicide Round-Up*. Retrieved from https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/2017-homicide-round-up/

International Crisis Group. (2017a). *Undocumented Migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America*. Retrieved from https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/el-salvador/undocumented-migration-northern-triangle-central-america

International Crisis Group. (2017b). *Mafia of the Poor: Gang Violence and Extortion in Central America*. Retrieved from https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/62-mafia-poor-gang-violence-and-extortion-central-america

International Crisis Group. (2016). *Easy Prey: Criminal Violence and Central American Migration*. Retrieved from https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/easy-prey-criminal-violence-and-central-american-migration

Isacson, A., Meyer, M., Smith, H. (2017). *Mexico's Southern Border. Security, Central American Migration, and U.S. Policy*. WOLA. Retrieved from https://www.wola.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/WOLA_Mexicos-Southern-Border-2017-1.pdf

Kulish, N., Yee, V., Dickerson, C., Robbins, L., Santos, F., & Medina, J. (2017). *Trump's Immigration Policies Explained*. The New York Times. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/21/us/trump-immigration-policies-deportation.html

Lajeunesse, W., & Prabucki, L. (2017). *Trump's tough immigration rhetoric slows illegal border crossings*. FOX News Politics. Retrieved from http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2017/05/11/trumps-tough-immigration-rhetoric-slows-illegal-border-crossings-were-at-trickle.html

La Susa, M. (2016). *Crime, Violence Driving Migration from Central America: Reports*. InSights Crime. Retrieved from https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/crime-and-violence-drive-migration-from-central-america-reports/

Mexican News Daily (2017). *Smugglers up prices for crossing border*. Retrieved from https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/smugglers-up-prices-due-to-immigration-policies/

Ministerio Público de Guatemala (2017). *La fiscalía contra el delito de femicidio.* Retrieved from https://www.mp.gob.gt/noticias/tag/la-fiscalia-contra-el-delito-de-femicidio/

Notimérica (2016). *Los autobuses de la muerte en Guatemala*. Retrieved from http://www.notimerica.com/sociedad/noticia-autobuses-muerte-guatemala-20160918112944.html

Orozco, M. (2017). *Remittances to Latin America and the Caribbean 2017*. THEDIALOGUE. Retrieved from https://www.thedialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Remittances-2017-1.pdf

Pierce, S., & Selee, A. (2017). *Immigration under Trump: A review of Policy Shifts in the Year Since the Election*. Washington DC: Migration Policy Institute.

Portillo Villeda, S., & Miklos, A. (2017). *Central Americans under Trump: Uncertainty on Both Sides of the Border*. LasaForum, pp. Volume XLVIII: Issue 2: 53-59.

Rodgers, D., Muggah, R., & Stevenson, C. (2009). *Gangs of Central America: Causes, Costs, and Interventions*. Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International and Development. Retrieved from http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/B-Occasional-papers/SAS-OP23-Gangs-Central-America.pdf

SEGOB. (2018). *National Statistics*. Secretaria de Gobernacion de Mexico. Retrieved from http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es_mx/SEGOB/Boletines_Estadisticos

Trump, D. (2017). *Executive Order: Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements*. Washington DC. Retrieved from: https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-border-security-immigration-enforcement-improvements/

United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2017). *International Migration Report 2017*. Retrieved from http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/ migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/MigrationReport2017_Highlights.pdf

United Nations, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR (2015). *Protection and Solutions Strategy for the Northern Triangle of Central America 2016-2018.* Retrieved from http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/Protection%20and%20Solutions%20Strategy%20for%20the%20Northern%20Triangle%20of%20Central%20America%202016-2018.pdf

WOLA (2017). *Children and Families Fleeing Violence in Central America*. Retrieved from https://www.wola.org/analysis/people-leaving-central-americas-northern-triangle/

Zong, J., & Batalova, J. (2015). *Central American Immigrants in the United States*. Migration Policy Institute. Retrieved from https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-american-immigrants-united-states-3

Declaration of originality

ETH
Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich
Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich

Declaration of originality

The signed declaration of originality is a component of every semester paper, Bachelor's thesis, Master's thesis and any other degree paper undertaken during the course of studies, including the respective electronic versions.

Lecturers may also require a declaration of originality for other written papers compiled for their courses.

_____

I hereby confirm that I am the sole author of the written work here enclosed and that I have compiled it in my own words. Parts excepted are corrections of form and content by the supervisor.

Title of work (in block letters):

Central American migration to and from the U.S. under the trump administration

Authored by (in block letters):
For papers written by groups the names of all authors are required.

Name(s):	**First name(s):**
Meier	Benjamin

With my signature I confirm that
− I have committed none of the forms of plagiarism described in the 'Citation etiquette' information sheet.
− I have documented all methods, data and processes truthfully.
− I have not manipulated any data.
− I have mentioned all persons who were significant facilitators of the work.

I am aware that the work may be screened electronically for plagiarism.

Place, date	**Signature(s)**
Zürich, 20/05/2018	B. Meier

For papers written by groups the names of all authors are required. Their signatures collectively guarantee the entire content of the written paper.