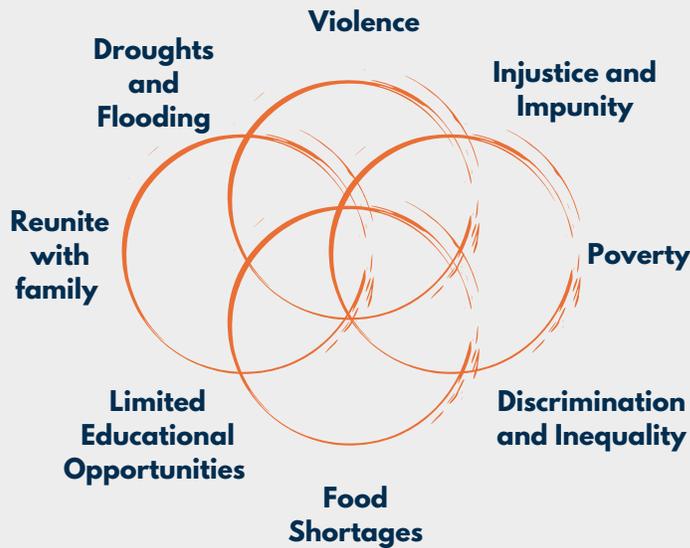


Why are children leaving Central America and arriving at the U.S. border?

Children and families arriving at the U.S. border to ask for protection is not new and it is not unexpected. The root causes of migration are complex and interconnected, and they have worsened over time. While most children are fleeing a form of violence, abuse, or exploitation, **several interconnected factors may be at play in every child's migration story:**



Alicia's Story

Alicia grew up in rural Guatemala with an abusive father who would hit her and her mother. Because her family's farm failed, they fell into poverty and experienced hunger. Alicia stopped attending school and started working when she was only 12 years old to help provide for her mom and siblings. But Alicia did not feel safe at home or at work, where she was exploited. Alicia fled Guatemala and when she finally arrived in the United States, she was connected to KIND for legal representation and won permanent protection in the United States.

What are the root causes of child migration from Central America?

Many of the drivers of child migration are deeply rooted and have intensified over time.



Instability

For decades, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala have experienced civil war, internal conflict, and natural disasters. This instability has led to weak institutions and poor governance as countries struggle to recover and rebuild.



Violence and Crime

El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala are among the most dangerous countries in the world. Widespread violence, including high rates of sexual and gender-based violence, forced recruitment of children by gangs, and human trafficking have been pushing migrants out of their homes, communities, and countries.



Poverty

El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala have some of the highest rates of poverty and economic inequality in Latin America. In Honduras and Guatemala, over half the population is living below the national poverty lines. In the western region of Guatemala it is even worse: three out of every four people live in poverty and nearly a third are experiencing extreme poverty.



Injustice and Impunity

The governments in the region have been largely unable or unwilling to protect their most vulnerable citizens. When crimes are committed, particularly crimes by gangs or violence directed at women and girls, they usually go unpunished. This impunity has created an environment where few feel safe and many lack trust in government.



Inequality and Discrimination

Gender inequality has led to pervasive gender-based violence, including high rates of femicide, sexual violence, violence against LGBT people, domestic violence, and child abuse. Longstanding, systemic discrimination against certain ethnic minorities—particularly indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants—has resulted in persecution of these groups and has exacerbated existing inequalities.

Why has migration seemed to increase over recent years and months?

The factors that drive children to leave their homes have only worsened in light of recent developments. The cruel policies of the Trump Administration, like “Remain in Mexico” and “Zero-Tolerance,” did not reduce migration, but only delayed it. The previous administration's pauses and cuts to foreign aid were counterproductive as they shut down programs designed to address the reasons why people migrate. In the past year, we have also seen new and increasing drivers of migration:



Economic Impacts of COVID-19

While the impacts of COVID-19 have been felt worldwide, Latin America has been among the regions hardest hit. Existing inequalities resulted in poor health outcomes and economic devastation for the poorest in the region, only deepening existing poverty and inequality.



Growing Food Insecurity

Years of crop failures due to disease and droughts have led to extreme food shortages and high rates of hunger and malnourishment —only exacerbated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic.



Increased Gender-Based Violence

During the COVID-19 pandemic, rates of gender-based violence and child abuse have increased dramatically as women and children are more likely to be at home with abusers, and access to protection and services has been strained and limited during the COVID response.



Impacts of Climate Change and Intensifying Droughts, Floods, and Hurricanes

The region is at high risk for natural disasters and extreme weather events. Most recently, back-to-back hurricanes in late 2020 caused over \$1 billion in damages and displaced hundreds of thousands of people.

How can the U.S. government address the root causes of child migration?

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting economic crisis, increasing gender-based violence, and back-to-back hurricanes, U.S. foreign assistance to Central America is more important than ever to protect vulnerable children.

✓ The U.S. government must provide **substantial, long-term development assistance** that addresses what is actually driving children and families to migrate. This means increasing funding for programs that address: gender and gang-based violence, child abuse and neglect, lack of educational and job opportunities, poverty and inequality, food insecurity, and the increasing impacts of climate change.

✓ The U.S. government must center its **root causes strategy** on the needs of **children, families, and vulnerable populations**.

✓ The U.S. government should **guarantee safe return and reintegration support** for all children for whom it is safe to return to Central America to help children feel safe in their communities and are not compelled to migrate again.

✓ U.S. foreign assistance should prioritize people and communities by **investing in local civil society organizations**, which is also the best way to ensure that assistance is protected from corruption.

✓ While Mexico should be seen as a valuable partner in any **regional strategy**, Mexico also needs assistance to **strengthen its ability to address root causes** in Mexico, protect migrants in transit, and receive asylum seekers who would like to stay in Mexico.

Addressing the root causes of migration is a necessary, long-term goal. In the short-term, children and other vulnerable people will continue to flee dangerous situations. **These migrants have the right to access the U.S. border to seek protection** and the U.S. government must work to ensure all children are safe. For more recommendations, read [KIND's Concrete Steps to Protect Unaccompanied Children on the Move](#), with policy recommendations to ensure migrant children are protected at every stage of their journey.



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