

Crime, Migration and Development in Central America¹

The crisis of a substantial increase in unaccompanied minors in the past three years touches on three main issues that require urgent action. First, it is essential to come up with the right response to address and manage the current undocumented migration crisis. Second, it is important to understand and clarify the factors causing or triggering the exponential flow over the past 3 years. Third, it is imperative to identify and implement short and long term solutions to mitigate an outflow of this magnitude.

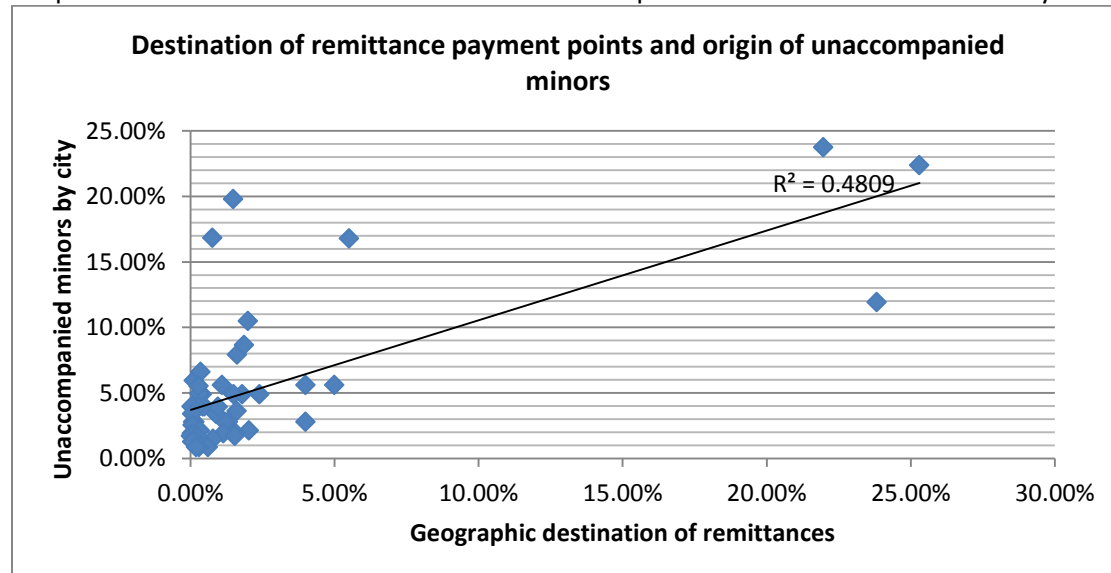
Addressing the Current Crisis

In the first case, this crisis and its management should be addressed not only by the US government but by Central American governments, as well. There are at least two main issues here: how to deal with those minors already released to parents in the US, and how to deal with minors coming forward. On this latter point, it is important to contain the crisis and expeditiously return many of those who attempt to come across the border. This attempt needs to be coordinated from the point of departure, not US border arrival, with Central American governments. On the former, those already in the United States should be treated as refugees, not simply as economic migrants. The surge in migrants is closely linked with various problems that have pushed them out of their countries of origin with tremendous force.

Understanding Causes of the Current Crisis

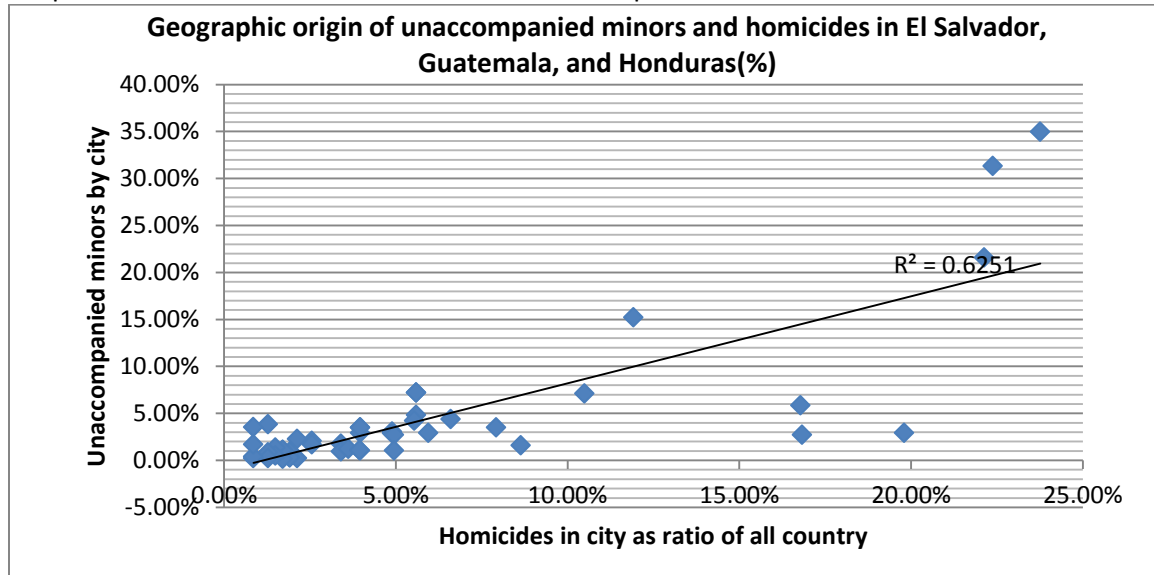
With regards to the second case, there is a confluence of dynamics, closely interconnected, that has led to this situation. There is a frustration and fear among migrants that their children are in danger and that little is being done back home. An analysis of the home towns of more than 15,000 minors coming from Central America, compared to the locations where people send money shows a strong relationship (see Graph 1). More importantly, however, there is a strong relationship between the minors' hometowns and the areas with the most homicides taking place (see Graph 2).

Graph 1: Existence of Correlation between Unaccompanied Minors and Remittance Payout Points



Source: Border Patrol Apprehension Data (Jan-May 2014) and Orozco, Manuel. Scorecard 2012.

Graph 2: Existence of Correlation between Unaccompanied Minors and Homicide Rates



Source: Border Patrol Apprehension Data (Jan-May 2014) and homicide rates from each country.

Moreover, it is unrealistic to ignore that immigration reform is at the center of this problem. The lack of immigration reform is also a trigger of frustration among many migrants who desperately want to rejoin with their children.

This frustration has been triggered at least by two or three other intervening factors. First, organized crime networks have taken over the cross border movement, and have brought economies of scale to the 'service,' lowering the cost of mobilizing people, with 'family packages' offered. The costs used to range between US\$5,000 to US\$6,000. In 2014 they had dropped to US\$3,500. Even last year when we interviewed some people (we have been interviewing families for some time and currently are doing a survey in Washington) the cost was about US\$6,500 for a minor. Second, a year after the 2010 massacre in Mexico carried out by the Zetas, the Mexican government introduced a transit visa for Central Americans as a means to reduce their risk of being abused. The third, but not very convincing aspect is that of the rumor of 'permisos' by the Obama administration. The reason is not convincing because most migrants have stressed that the reasons their children have come is insecurity and the work of other organizations even prior to 2012 shows this to be a problem. However, such rumors spread out across migrant networks and coyotes may have had some resonance.

What is clear is that for an exponential growth over the past 3 years, powerful triggers other than rumors need to be present. The economies of scale factor seem to be the more plausible: a drop prices on a commodity that is typically in high demand (let's say a plasma or 3D TV) leads to a flock of people to acquire the commodity.

The continued crime rates in the region is a central intervening factor. We are talking about at least 10 homicides a day (see Table 1): in a country like El Salvador with 20,000 youth gang members, and with 35% of undocumented migrants with children in El Salvador, it is a frightening thought that their child will be next in the list of gang members and/or gang victims.

Table 1: Average Daily Homicides in Central America, 2000 - 2013

Country	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Belize	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0				
Costa Rica	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
El Salvador	7	7	6	7	8	10	11	10	9	9	9	12	7	7
Guatemala	9	9	10	12	13	15	17	16	18	19	15	15	14	15
Honduras	9	10	12	12	6	7	9	10	12	12	17	19	18	18
Nicaragua	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1
Panama	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	1	1
Central America	28	29	32	34	31	37	41	40	44	46	46	51	42	43

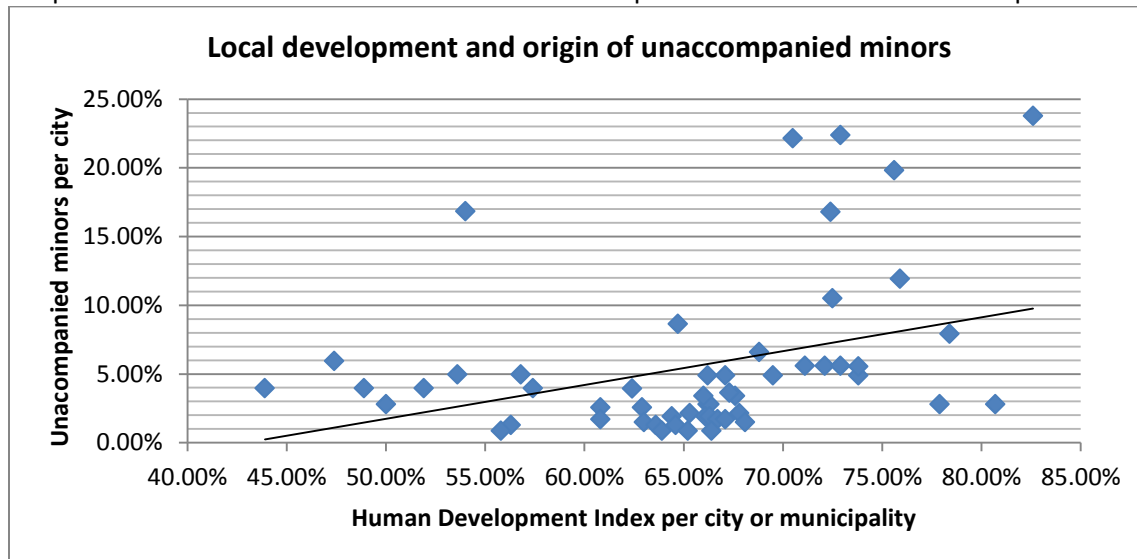
Source: Crime statistics from each country.

Identifying Short and Long Term Solutions

The third issue, of short and long term solutions, is the most central. We need to address Central America as a region that did not recover well from their civil wars of the 80s and still is facing a multitude of problems ranging from poor economic performance under obsolete growth models, to globalized crime networks that have overwhelmed local governments, which are only weakly democratic.

Congress and the White House need to take the region more seriously. One way to do so is to create a regional development strategy that addresses a number of issues (growth, human capital, insecurity, among others). In 1999 we managed a project with USAID and the EU engagement called Central America 2020 (http://ca2020.fiu.edu/documents_publications.html) where a development strategy was put forward but unfortunately it was somewhat ignored by other 'priorities.' I recommend we take another look at the region and develop a serious strategy to improve conditions over the next 15 years, *Central America 2030*. The central issue here is education and skills programs for youth and the emerging labor force to ensure they are ready to succeed in the global economy.

Graph 3: Existence of Correlation between Unaccompanied Minors and Local Development



Source: Border Patrol Apprehension Data (Jan – May 2014) and Human Development Index for select municipalities.