

Human Rights on the Southern Border: Why People Flee El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras



Central American migrants traveling by land must cross Mexico to reach the United States, often making the 1,500-mile journey atop cargo trains known as “La Bestia.” Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) increased military personnel along migrant routes, deporting nearly all apprehended asylum seekers back to their countries of origin. Photo by Getty Images

Reasons People Flee Include:

- Poverty
- Family reunification
- Endemic crime
- Gang-related violence, extortion and forced recruitment
- High rates of domestic violence and sexual abuse of girls
- Scarce social services
- Limited opportunities to learn, or to earn a living

The Facts by Country:

El Salvador

- El Salvador continues to have one of the highest homicide rates in the world. In 2017, authorities recorded 3,954 homicides. Gangs battle for territorial control. They forcibly recruit children and subject some women, girls, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people to sexual slavery. Gangs kill, disappear, rape, or displace those who resist them, including government officials, security forces, and journalists. ([OSAC](#))
- Security forces have been largely ineffective in protecting the population and have committed egregious abuses, including the extrajudicial execution of alleged gang members, sexual assaults, and enforced disappearances.
- Girls and women alleged to have had abortions have been imprisoned for homicide and aggravated homicide, including during the year. LGBT individuals also face discrimination and violence.

Guatemala

- Violent crime and homicides continue to plague Guatemala. In 2017, the Guatemalan National Police (PNC) reported approximately 4,400 homicides, 5,200 aggravated assaults, and over 2,900 missing persons. These numbers are on a downward trend in comparison to 2016. However, Guatemala remains consistently ranked by commercial security sources as one of the top 10-25 most dangerous countries in the world. Violent crime is attributed to endemic poverty, an abundance of weapons, a legacy of societal violence, and the presence of organized criminal gangs Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and the Mara Barrio 18 (18th Street). Guatemala's murder rate appears driven by: narco-trafficking activity, gang-related violence, a heavily-armed population, and a police/judicial system that remains unable to hold many criminals accountable. ([OSAC](#))
- Violence and extortion by powerful criminal organizations remain serious problems in Guatemala. Gang-related violence is an important factor prompting people, including unaccompanied children and young adults, to leave the country.
- In March 2017, 41 adolescent girls were killed in a fire in the Hogar Seguro government-run shelter. Fifty-six girls had been locked up for the night in a space that could safely hold only 11, without access to water or a restroom, following a protest against the poor living conditions and treatment received in the shelter—including reports of sexual violence stretching back years. After at least six hours in those conditions, one of the girls set a mattress on fire so guards would open the door—but they didn't.
- Abortion is legal in Guatemala only when the life of a pregnant woman or girl is in danger. There is a bill which would expand the criminalization of abortion and could subject women who have miscarriages to prosecution. It would also raise the maximum sentence for abortion from 3 to 10 years and would make it a crime to engage in “the promotion of abortion,” which could mean that the provision of sexual and reproductive information, counseling, or referrals might result in sentences of up to 10 years.

Honduras

- Since 2010, Honduras has had one of the highest murder rates in the world. ([OSAC](#))
- There is widespread corruption and abuse in the police force and judicial system, which are ineffective in squelching the violence in the country. As of April 2018, more than 5,000 of the more than 10,000 police officers evaluated by the Special Commission for Police Reform Restructuring had been removed, and in June, the commission identified more than 1,300 case files of removed officers for further investigation into alleged criminal activities.
- 25 journalists were murdered between 2014 and 2016. Ninety-one percent of killings of journalists since 2001 remain unpunished.
- Violence based on gender identity or sexual orientation is a major problem in Honduras. Violence against LGBT individuals forces them into “internal displacement” or to flee the country in search of international protection.
- Abortion is illegal without any exceptions, and women and girls who terminate pregnancies can face prison sentences of up to six years. Emergency contraception is also prohibited.