



April 13, 2021

The Honorable Albio Sires  
Chair  
Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security,  
Migration and International Economic Policy  
Committee on Foreign Affairs  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mark Green  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security,  
Migration and International Economic Policy  
Committee on Foreign Affairs  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Green, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I'm Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. I wish to express my appreciation for the opportunity to submit this statement in connection with the April 14 hearing, titled "Renewing the United States' Commitment to Addressing the Root Causes of Migration from Central America."

The subcommittee is addressing a crucial and emotionally wrenching issue facing the United States. We continue to see thousands of migrants, primarily from Central America, reaching our southern border every week. In March 2021, authorities detained more than 172,000 people at that border. The total included some 19,000 unaccompanied minors, mostly individuals in their mid-teens, but some who are even younger. According to an April 11, 2021, article in the *New York Times*, officials fear that by June they could be called upon to provide continuing care for more than 35,000 children and adolescents in that category.

There is no single cause of this massive migration, nor is there an easy, comprehensive solution. Nevertheless, it is an increasingly urgent problem that must be addressed, and key policy changes have become imperative.

Some of the Central American migrants who make the nearly 1,500-mile trek through Mexico to the United States do so for the same reason that generations before them from around the world sought a new home and a fresh start: the perception that economic opportunities are far greater here than they are in their home countries. That factor may be especially powerful for immigrants coming from Central America's "northern tier" countries: Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. The level of poverty in those nations is severe, as per capita gross domestic product

(GDP) figures from 2019 confirm. Guatemala's per capita GDP was \$4,620 and El Salvador's \$4,187. The figures for Honduras and Nicaragua were even lower—\$2,575 and \$1,913, respectively. The comparable figure for the United States was \$65,298. It is hardly surprising that this country would be a magnet for Central America's economically beleaguered populations.

However, there is another factor that is at least as important in being a driving force for the migration—especially over the past decade or so. Many Central Americans are fleeing appalling levels of corruption and violence, much of it associated with the trade in illegal drugs and the U.S.-orchestrated campaign to suppress that commerce.

In 2006, President George W. Bush's administration pressed Mexico's newly elected president, Felipe Calderon, to wage a more vigorous campaign against the drug cartels in his country. Calderon then made the military the lead agency and launched a vigorous armed offensive. The result was outright warfare between the military and drug-trafficking organizations and a surge in fatalities that—except for a modest interlude from 2012 to 2016—continues to spiral upward.

As pressure on the cartels from Mexico's government mounted after 2006, traffickers relocated many of their processing and distribution operations to Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, and to a lesser extent, to Nicaragua. It was a manifestation of what drug policy experts have described as the “push-down, pop-up” effect. Drug war “victories” in one arena simply led to the relocation of the trade to other areas or countries, (sometimes with new, dominant players) where the immediate pressure is not as great.

As a result, the already fragile and turbulent societies of Central America's northern tier experienced a massive spike in both corruption and violence. Drug trafficking organizations increased their penetration of governments at all levels, from village mayors and police chiefs to members of national parliaments and executive administrations. The recent conviction in a U.S. federal court of Juan Antonio Hernández Alvarado, brother of the Honduras' current president and a former deputy in the National Congress, is indicative of the problem's extent and severity.

As they have done in other drug-source or drug-transiting countries, the cartels frequently give Central American office holders and law enforcement personnel the stark choice of “silver or lead”—either accept bribes to let the trade in illegal drugs proceed unimpeded or suffer fatal consequences. Even those officials who might be willing to risk their own lives to defy the traffickers often hesitate to do so because they understand that the “lead” option applies not only to themselves but to their family members.

Major portions of the northern tier countries are now under the de facto control of one or more cartel armies. Among other actions, the cartels rigorously recruit teenagers and young adults into their ranks. As in the case of their interactions with political and military figures, the cartels have adopted a dual approach in their recruitment efforts for new gang members. The preferred method is to entice adolescents from poverty-stricken families with the prospect of previously unattainable levels of wealth. In most cases, that temptation is quite sufficient by itself to acquire new recruits.

Given the huge profit margins in the illegal drug trade, it is very difficult for legal businesses to provide job opportunities that can compete effectively. Aid programs from both public and private sector U.S. programs have achieved some modest successes in a few poor Central American neighborhoods, particularly in El Salvador's capital, San Salvador. Nevertheless, facilitating legal, economically competitive employment opportunities remains an uphill struggle.

Moreover, when financial incentives are not sufficient to fill personnel slots, cartel leaders are not hesitant to resort to conscription—especially for the most dangerous, lower-level jobs. Some of the unaccompanied minors who arrive at the U.S. border cite their desire to stay out of the drug gangs as the principal reason why they left their homelands for the United States. Likewise, parents of intact families mention the fear that their children either would be seduced into the drug trafficking culture or forced into it as a reason for their decision to make the long journey.

U.S. political leaders, including former President Donald Trump, have highlighted the destructive role that El Salvador's MS-13 organization is playing. Trump even declared MS-13 to be a threat to national security, both because of its violent actions in El Salvador and incidents that its U.S. affiliates caused inside the United States. Although MS-13 may be the most notorious of the violent Central American drug gangs, it is hardly the only one. Local units of major Mexican cartels, most notably Los Zetas and two factions of the Sinaloa cartel, have established tenacious footholds in Central American nations. Indeed, as destructive an impact as MS-13 has had in El Salvador, the Mexican-controlled organizations in Honduras have now generated even greater carnage.

Although there has been some improvement in recent years, the level of violence in the northern tier countries remains alarmingly high. The homicide rate in Honduras, for example, was still a worrisome 37.6 per 100,000 people in 2020. Despite a 20 percent rise in 2020, the U.S. rate remained under 6 per 100,000. That perception of a substantially safer environment in the United States creates a strong attraction for Central Americans, especially those with children and teenagers.

Most people in any society are reluctant to leave their homelands to experience uncertain prospects in an alien country. The pull of family, friends, and the familiarity of the culture in which a person has grown up is a powerful factor that induces a majority to remain relatively close to their birthplace. But severe lack of economic opportunity can override those incentives to remain close to home. Pervasive criminality that foments fear for the safety and lives of family members has even greater potential to produce that effect. For many Central Americans, those two factors have combined, and the resulting hybrid creates an overpowering incentive to make the perilous journey through Mexico to reach the United States.

It definitely is a perilous journey. Not only do the cartels seek to use migrants as drug mules to bring their product over the border to U.S. markets, but there are many other dangers. A variety of criminal elements seize opportunities to exploit or victimize the travelers. Robbery is a common occurrence, often depriving the migrants of what few possessions they were able to bring along. Assaults and abductions are less common, but they are still frequent enough to pose a serious threat. Indeed, some parents of adolescent girls reportedly put their young daughters on birth control pills because of the significant risk of rape during the course of the 1,500-mile trek. The migrants are aware of the many risks, and they have not undertaken such a journey for frivolous reasons.

The United States badly needs to have a meaningful, substantive debate on immigration policy. Instead, it is an issue that has generated an abundance of political posturing but very little in terms of workable policies. It seems churlish at best for a country inhabited almost entirely by descendants of earlier waves of immigrants to slam the door on the latest group seeking refuge and new opportunities. It especially is inappropriate to do so when U.S. policies have been a major factor in the corruption and violence afflicting Central American countries and driving migrants northward. The United States needs to create a far more streamlined system to integrate migrants into society

and provide a pathway to citizenship. Keeping millions of people in legal limbo indefinitely is both ineffectual and cruel. In addition to reforming the broken immigration system, U.S. policymakers must acknowledge that Washington's war on illegal drugs has gravely exacerbated Central America's woes and generated pressure for greater migration.

Washington's policy of drug prohibition endeavors to solve a very real domestic public health problem by reducing both demand and supply. Demand reduction efforts focus on education about the adverse effects of certain drugs and imposing criminal penalties for using such substances. The track record strongly indicates that the former approach has been far more effective than the latter. Declines in the number of Americans using cocaine over the past three decades, for example, are attributable more to greater public understanding about the deleterious health effects of that drug than on the imprisonment of a small minority of unlucky individuals who are convicted of drug possession.

Efforts to solve America's domestic drug problem by suppressing the supply coming from other countries is especially futile. As long as robust demand for mind-altering drugs exists in the United States, domestic and foreign suppliers will endeavor to meet that demand and receive the profits from doing so. Prohibition merely fattens the profit margins and guarantees that the trade will be dominated by (usually violent) criminal organizations instead of legitimate business people. That was the fundamental lesson from America's disastrous experiment with alcohol prohibition in the 1920s and early 1930s, and the same pathologies have characterized the current policy of drug prohibition.

It is bad enough for people in the United States to bear the consequences of a faulty policy, but Washington's supply-side campaigns are financially enriching drug trafficking organizations and making them exceptionally powerful players in drug-source and drug-transiting countries, especially in Mexico and Central America. The societal disruptions that those cartels are causing constitute a major factor impelling Central Americans to flee the corruption, intimidation and violence. For most of them, the preferred destination is the United States.

If U.S. leaders want to ease the pressure that desperate migrants are creating on our southern border, one essential step is to abandon the supply-side component of drug prohibition policy. Pressuring Central American governments to (somehow) suppress powerful drug trafficking organizations that are pursuing billions of dollars in potential profits by meeting consumer demand in the United States is not only an exercise in futility, it creates an array of enormously destructive side effects for those societies. It is well past time for U.S. policymakers to stop off-loading responsibility for this country's domestic drug problems onto already fragile and desperately poor hemispheric neighbors.

Sincerely,

/s/

Ted Galen Carpenter  
Senior Fellow  
Cato Institute