

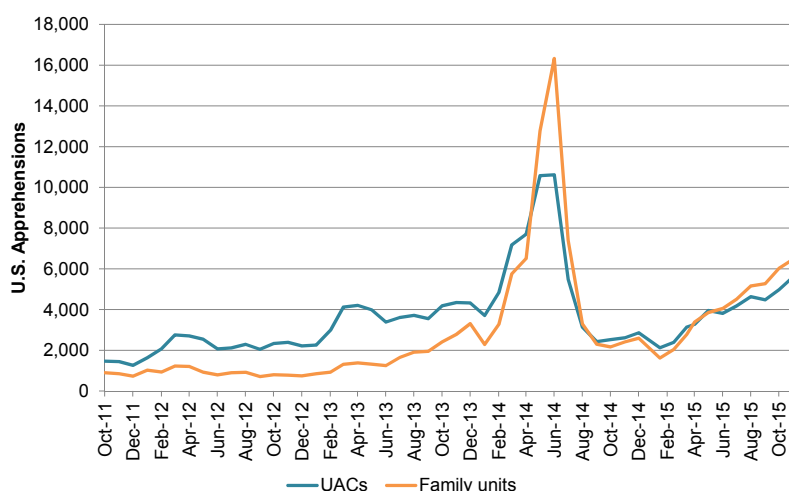
Trends in Unaccompanied Child and Family Migration from Central America

By Marc R. Rosenblum and Isabel Ball

After reaching record high levels during the spring and summer of 2014, the flow of Central American unaccompanied children (UACs) and families arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border declined sharply in winter 2014. Data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) show a significant resurgence in the numbers of child migrants and families from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras arriving in the United States in the summer and fall of 2015.

As Figure 1 illustrates, the downturn in Central American arrivals during the fall of 2014 was as dramatic as the earlier surge. After arrivals of unaccompanied children and family units (the term used by CBP for parents and children traveling together) peaked at 27,000 in June 2014, the numbers dropped below 5,000 just three months later. Combined child and family apprehensions averaged less than 5,000 people per month through February 2015, the lowest totals in nearly two years.

Figure 1. U.S. Apprehensions of Unaccompanied Minors and Family Units, October 2011–November 2015



Notes: Data include total child and family apprehensions (i.e., including those from Mexico and other countries outside Central America); about two-thirds of unaccompanied children and more than 90 percent of family unit apprehensions since fiscal year (FY) 2012 have been of migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Unaccompanied children from Mexico, who account for most of the remainder, are exempt from certain U.S. legal protections enjoyed by Central Americans.

Sources: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of data for fiscal year (FY) 2012 through March 2015 from Department of Homeland Security (DHS), “Fiscal Year 2015 Six Month Border Security Update by Secretary Johnson,” www.dhs.gov/news/2015/04/24/fiscal-year-2015-six-month-border-security-update; and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), “Southwest Border Unaccompanied Children,” various months, www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children/fy-2016.

Arrivals of child and adult migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (countries referred to as the Northern Triangle of Central America) began increasing in early 2015, rising from 3,743 in January 2015 to 12,091 in November, the most recent data available at publication. Arrivals in October and November 2015 represented two of the highest levels ever observed, surpassed only by the five months at the peak of the 2014 surge between March and July of that year. Thus, while the drop in child and family arrivals in fall 2014 led some to believe the regional migration crisis had been resolved, these more recent data are a reminder that humanitarian and migration pressures in the Northern Triangle remain a major concern.

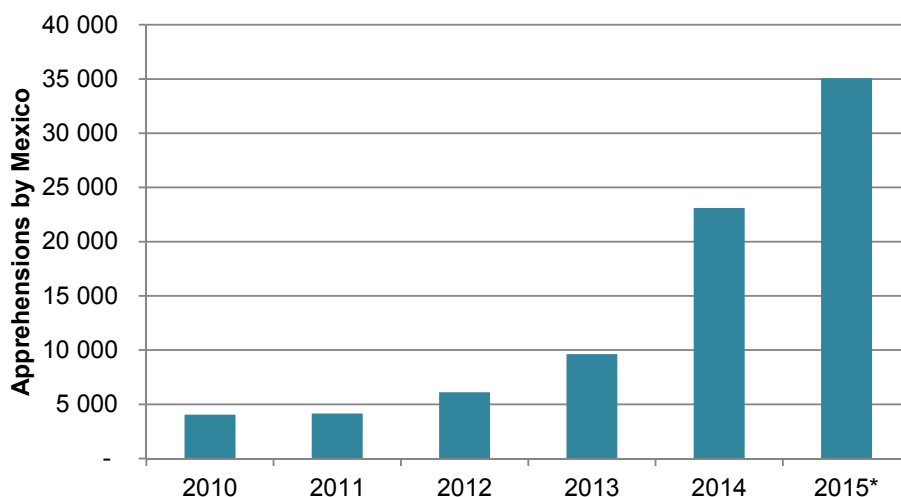
What caused the sharp drop in Central American UAC and family migration flows in summer 2014, and why have the numbers begun to climb once again? Undoubtedly, numerous factors contributed to the downturn. The United States intensified its enforcement efforts at the U.S.-Mexico border, detained large numbers of Central American women and children,¹ targeted more resources to investigate and prosecute migrant smugglers, and

worked with the Northern Triangle countries on a public information campaign to discourage outflows. Guatemala and Honduras also took additional steps to secure their common borders and Guatemala’s border with Mexico; and the three Northern Triangle countries announced a large-scale development strategy known as the Plan for the Alliance for Prosperity.²

Perhaps most importantly, Mexico implemented a major new enforcement effort, known as the Southern Border Program, to secure its borders with Guatemala and Belize and to block migration flows along the country’s major smuggling pathways through eastern Mexico toward south Texas. As a result, while U.S. apprehensions of unaccompanied children fell almost by half between fiscal year (FY) 2014 and FY 2015, Mexican apprehensions increased by 50 percent during that period, and were on pace for a 740 percent increase since 2011 (see Figure 2).

The combination of lower U.S. apprehensions and increased Mexican apprehensions means that Mexico is now responsible for a growing share of all child apprehensions within the

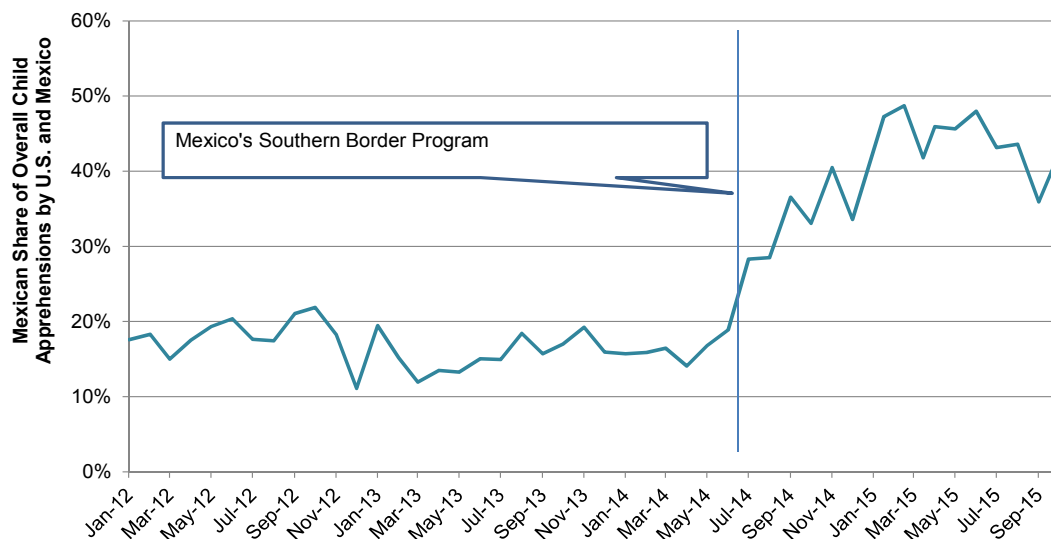
Figure 2. Mexican Apprehensions of Child Migrants, 2010–15



Notes: Mexican data are calendar year. The 2015 data are a projection based on data for the first ten months of the year. Data include all minors apprehended in Mexico, the vast majority coming from the Northern Triangle.

Sources: MPI analysis of Mexican Interior Ministry data; for 2010 data, see Instituto Nacional de Migración, *Boletín Mensual de Estadísticas Migratorias*, Table 3.1.2, www.gobernacion.gob.mx/es_mx/SEGOB/Boletines_Estadisticos; for 2011–2015 data, see Instituto Nacional de Migración, *Boletín Mensual de Estadísticas Migratorias*, Table 3.1.3.

Figure 3. Apprehensions by Mexico as Share of Overall U.S. and Mexican Child Apprehensions, October 2011 – October 2015



Notes: Figure is based on data representing Mexican apprehensions of children (both accompanied and unaccompanied) and U.S. apprehensions of unaccompanied children. Data on U.S. apprehensions of accompanied children (i.e., children within family units) were not available, but would shift the entire figure down if included.

Sources: MPI analysis of DHS, “Fiscal Year 2015 Six Month Border Security Update by Secretary Johnson;” monthly versions of CBP, “Southwest Border Unaccompanied Children;” and Instituto Nacional de Migración, *Boletín Mensual de Estadísticas Migratorias*, Table 3.1.2 for 2010, and Tables 3.1.3 for 2011-2015.

region. As Figure 3 illustrates, Mexico apprehended about 20 percent of children bound for the United States before and during the 2014 surge, but since the start of the Southern Border Program, its share of apprehensions has more than doubled, to an average of 42 percent.

A. Push Factors Driving the Up-swing in Flows

If increased regional enforcement explains falling arrivals in the fall of 2014, what accounts for the resurgence of flows in 2015? In general, the answer is that the underlying drivers of child and family migration from Central America remain in place, and arguably have intensified. As a result, while aggressive U.S., Mexican, and Central American enforcement successfully deterred most would-be migrants for several months, powerful push factors in the region and pull factors in the United States appear more recently to be overwhelming these efforts.

In particular, all three Northern Triangle countries continue to experience high levels of violence, food insecurity, and poverty, the primary push factors contributing to migration outflows from the region.³ El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have for several years accounted for the highest murder rates in the world, with the deaths frequently connected to drug trafficking and organized crime,⁴ often affecting women and children.⁵ In El Salvador, a truce between rival gangs led to a reduction in homicides in 2012-13. But violence intensified when the truce fell apart in 2014, and the country’s homicide count climbed in August 2015 to the highest monthly total since the country’s civil war (which ended in 1992), putting El Salvador on pace to surpass Honduras as the world’s most dangerous peacetime country.⁶ Another form of violence, domestic abuse, also remains at very high levels, and a 2015 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) study on Northern Triangle women seeking asylum in the United States cited prolonged instances of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse in the home as reasons for flight—many having initially sought state protection they

never received.⁷ In FY 2015, 82 percent of Northern Triangle women subject to screening by asylum officers (13,116 of 16,077 cases) were found to have a credible fear of persecution if returned to their home country—the basic criteria for being eligible to apply for asylum in the United States.⁸

Economic conditions also remain an important push factor. In addition to the Northern Triangle’s long-standing poverty⁹ and limited employment opportunities,¹⁰ the region has also been afflicted by severe drought. With the drought now in its second full year, at least 13 percent of households in El Salvador, 25 percent in Guatemala, and 36 percent in Honduras—an estimated 1.5 million people in the Northern Triangle—face food insecurity.

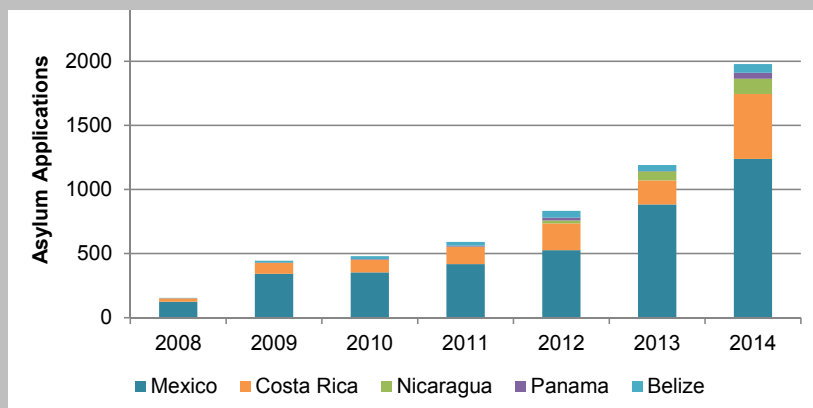
Drought conditions are expected to intensify in the coming months due to El Niño-influenced weather patterns throughout Central America, where the United Nations World Food Program predicted in November 2015 that 2.3 million people will need food aid as a direct result.¹¹

The region’s political instability in 2015 further limited the ability of government to respond to governance challenges across the board, whether related to drought, poverty, or violence.¹² Two former Northern Triangle presidents were charged with serious corruption crimes in recent months, along with the sitting president of Guatemala, Otto Pérez Molina, who was forced to resign and was imprisoned in September 2015.¹³ As the U.S. Congress debated whether to provide funding for the Alliance

Box 1. Protection Claims Stretch Beyond the United States

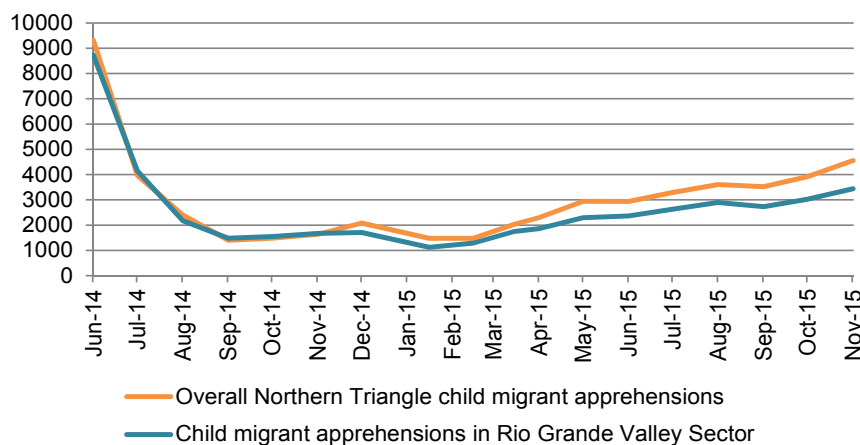
Notably, the high rates of violence in the Northern Triangle have resulted in significant increases in asylum applications from citizens of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras throughout the region—not just in the United States. As Figure 4 illustrates, asylum applications by Northern Triangle nationals in Mexico, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama, and Belize increased a combined 1,200 percent between 2008 and 2014. By comparison, asylum applications by Northern Triangle nationals in the United States increased by 370 percent in this period, from 5,500 to 26,000, according to United Nations data. Almost two-thirds of the Central American asylum applications filed in 2014 (63 percent) were filed in Mexico, while Costa Rica received the second-largest number (26 percent).

Figure 4. Northern Triangle Asylum Applications in Mexico and other Central American Countries, 2008-14



Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “Population Statistics: Asylum-Seekers (Refugee Status Determination),” accessed December 9, 2015, http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/asylum_seekers.

Figure 5. U.S. Apprehensions of Northern Triangle Unaccompanied Minors Overall and in the Rio Grande Valley Sector, June 2014–September 2015



Source: MPI analysis of monthly versions of CBP, “Southwest Border Unaccompanied Children.”

for Prosperity development plan, policymakers repeatedly cited corruption in the region as a major barrier to the plan’s successful implementation.¹⁴

B. Pull Factors Driving the Migration Flows

Factors in the United States that have encouraged the migration of Central American minors and families also have remained undiminished since 2014. After three decades of migration from the Northern Triangle, about one in five Salvadorans and one in 15 Guatemalans and Hondurans already live in the United States,¹⁵ making the United States the obvious destination for most children and families fleeing the region.

While the United States responded to the 2014 surge by increasing its reception and adjudication resources to begin hearings for families and unaccompanied children within three weeks of their arrival, chronic funding shortfalls for immigration courts mean that more than half of such cases opened in 2014—and more than three-quarters of those opened

in 2015—were still pending as of November 2015.¹⁶ These lag times undermine the U.S.-Central American media campaign warning people that they will not be permitted to remain in the United States; the processing delays also reinforce smugglers’ misrepresentation of U.S. policy that children and families will be granted immediate permission (“*permisos*”) to reside in the United States.¹⁷ Slow processing times also have limited the impact of the Central American Minors (CAM) Refugee/Parole Program, an in-country processing program that the United States initiated in December 2014; restrictions on the program’s scope also have resulted in small numbers.¹⁸ During the program’s first year, 5,000 children applied for admission to the United States and just six had been successfully admitted as of mid-November.¹⁹

C. Adapting to Increased Enforcement

In addition to the persistence of the underlying push-and-pull factors, a final factor that appears to be contributing to the resurgence in Central American flows is that smugglers and

migrants have adapted to the increases in enforcement in Mexico by choosing new routes to get to the United States. These shifting routes have been documented in media reports,²⁰ and have begun to show up in changing apprehension trends at the U.S.-Mexico border. In particular, while the vast majority of Central American unaccompanied minors who reached the United States in 2014 were apprehended in the Border Patrol's Rio Grande Valley (RGV) Sector in southern-most Texas, a growing number arriving since spring 2015 have been intercepted in the neighboring Laredo and Del Rio sectors (see Figure 4).

D. What Does the Future Hold?

Considering the high levels of violence throughout the Northern Triangle, in addition to poverty, food insecurity, and political turmoil, unaccompanied children and families alike can be expected to continue to try to leave in search of safety and improved lives. Given the large numbers of people in the region who have ties to relatives and communities in the United States, as well as the lengthy backlogs in the U.S. court system for deciding their asylum claims, Central American migrants will continue to try to make their way to the United States, aided by smuggling networks that nimbly adapt to enforcement efforts, both in Mexico and the United States. Until these underlying conditions change, the flows can be expected to persist.

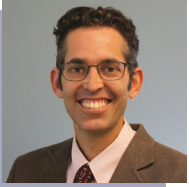
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Endnotes

- 1 The Obama administration had implemented a policy in 2009 to strictly limit the detention by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) of family units (i.e., of children apprehended with their parents), but as part of its response to surging arrivals in June 2014 DHS initiated a policy of generally detaining arriving family units while their asylum cases were pending. In February and July 2015, a pair of federal court cases found aspects of the government's family detention policies unlawful, and in October 2015 the administration implemented a new policy under which families are generally released from detention within 20 days.
- 2 Governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, "Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle: A Road Map." The Obama administration's fiscal year (FY) 2016 budget request included \$1 billion in foreign assistance to support the plan, and in December 2015, Congress committed \$750 million in support of the plan as part of the *Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2016*; see Peter J. Meyer and Clare Ribando Seelke, *Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2015), 17, www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41731.pdf.
- 3 For an overview of push-and-pull factors contributing to the 2014 surge in Central American unaccompanied child and family flows, see Marc R. Rosenblum, *Unaccompanied Child Migration to the United States: The Tension between Protection and Prevention* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2015), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/unaccompanied-child-migration-united-states-tension-between-protection-and-prevention.
- 4 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean* (Washington, DC: UNODC, 2012), 8, www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/TOC_Central_America_and_the_Caribbean_english.pdf; UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2013: Trends, Contexts, Data* (Vienna: UNODC, 2014), 33, www.unodc.org/documents/gsh/pdfs/2014_GLOBAL_HOMICIDE_BOOK_web.pdf.
- 5 Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras, "Al Menos 434 Niños Fueron Asesinados en Honduras Durante 2014: Observatorio de la Violencia," (news release, September 11, 2015), <https://presencia.unah.edu.hn/seguridad/articulo/al-menos-434-ninos-fueron-asesinados-en-honduras-durante-2014-observatorio-de-la-violencia->; United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Hidden in Plain Sight: A Statistical Analysis of Violence Against Children* (New York: UNICEF, 2014), 2, www.unicef.org/publications/files/Hidden_in_plain_sight_statistical_analysis_Summary_EN_2_Sept_2014.pdf.
- 6 Nina Lakhani, "El Salvador sees most deadly month in 10 years as violence overwhelms nation," *The Guardian*, April 6, 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/06/el-salvador-violence-end-to-gang-truce-proves-deadly; *The Guardian*, "El Salvador gang violence pushes murder rate to postwar record," *The Guardian*, September 2, 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/el-salvador-gang-violence-murder-rate-record.
- 7 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Women on the Run: First-Hand Accounts of Refugees Fleeing El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico* (Washington, DC: UNHCR, 2015), 25-26, www.unhcr.org/5630f24c6.html.
- 8 Ibid., 50.
- 9 According to 2010 and 2011 estimates, 37 percent of people in El Salvador, 54 percent in Guatemala, and 60 percent in Honduras lived below the poverty line; see U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), "The World Factbook (CIA): Economy profiles for El Salvador," accessed November 10, 2015, www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/es.html; CIA, "The World Factbook (CIA): Economy profiles for Guatemala," accessed December 30, 2015, www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gt.html; CIA, "The World Factbook (CIA): Economy profiles for Honduras," accessed December 30, 2015, www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ho.html.
- 10 According to a 2013 study, one in four young Hondurans, Guatemalans, and Salvadorans are so-called *ninis* (*ni estudian, ni trabajan*), meaning they are out of school and unemployed; this is the highest rate in Latin America. See International Labor Organization (ILO), *Trabajo Decente y Juventud en América Latina 2013: Políticas para la Acción* (Lima, Peru: Organización Internacional del Trabajo, Oficina Regional para América Latina, 2013), 44, www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---americas/--ro-lima/documents/publication/wcms_235577.pdf.
- 11 UN News Center, "El Niño: 2.3 million Central Americans will need food aid, UN warns in latest alert," November 12, 2015, www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=52535#.VnAm0UorIdV. The 2.3 million people predicted to be in need of food aid refers to citizens across all Central American countries.
- 12 *El Diario Hoy*, "Clase política de C.A. sin capacidad para resolver inseguridad," *El Diario Hoy*, June 26, 2015, www.elsalvador.com/articulo/nacional/clase-politica-sin-capacidad-para-resolver-inseguridad-78464.

- 13 Katherine Corcoran, "Indicted Central American ex-presidents may signal new willingness to go after untouchables," Associated Press, December 5, 2015, www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015/12/05/indicted-ex-leaders-a-message-to-central-america-elites; Azam Ahmed and Elisabeth Malkin, "Otto Pérez Molina of Guatemala Is Jailed Hours After Resigning Presidency," *The New York Times*, September 3, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/09/04/world/americas/otto-perez-molina-guatemalan-president-resigns-amid-scandal.html?_r=0.
- 14 See for example, U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, "Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Carper Host Northern Triangle Officials," (news release, March 18, 2015), www.hsgac.senate.gov/media/minority-media/chairman-johnson-ranking-member-carper-host-northern-triangle-officials; Testimony of Roger F. Noriega, Visiting Fellow, American Enterprise Institute, before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Securing the Border: Understanding and Addressing the Root Causes of Central American migration to the United States*, 114th Cong., 1st sess., March, 25, 2015, 2-4, www.hsgac.senate.gov/hearings/securing-the-border-understanding-and-addressing-the-root-causes-of-central-american-migration-to-the-united-states.
- 15 As of 2014, the United States was home to 1,315,000 Salvadorans, 920,000 Guatemalans, and 590,000 Hondurans; see U.S. Census Bureau, American Fact Finder, "Place of Birth for the Foreign-Born Population in the United States, 2014," accessed December 30, 2015, http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_11_1YR_B05006&prodType=table. Nearly half (49 percent) of all Salvadoran and 47 percent of Honduran unaccompanied children (UACs) report having at least one parent in the United States; see UNHCR, *Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico* (Washington, DC: UNHCR, 2014), 63, www.unhcrwashington.org/sites/default/files/1_UAC_Children%20on%20the%20Run_Full%20Report.pdf. And 85 percent of Central American child migrants intercepted by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) are eventually placed with a U.S.-based relative; see U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, "Fact Sheet: U.S. Department of Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Refugee Resettlement, Unaccompanied Children's Program," last updated August 2015, www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/unaccompanied_childrens_services_fact_sheet_0.pdf.
- 16 As of November 2015, 53 percent of UAC cases and 52 percent of family cases opened in fiscal year (FY) 2014 were still pending; 78 percent of UAC cases and 81 percent of family cases opened in FY 2015 remained pending as of November 2015. These data were calculated by the authors using data from the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC), "Priority Immigration Court Cases: Women with Children: Court Data through November 2015," accessed December 16, 2015, <http://trac.syr.edu/phptools/immigration/mwc>; and TRAC, "Juveniles—Immigration Court Deportation Proceedings: Court Data through November 2015," accessed December 16, 2015, <http://trac.syr.edu/phptools/immigration/juvenile>.
- 17 Testimony of Kimberly Gianopoulos, Director of International Affairs and Trade, U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Ongoing Migration from Central America: An Examination of FY 2015 Apprehensions*, 114th Cong., 1st sess., October 21, 2015, 6, www.gao.gov/assets/680/673414.pdf.
- 18 See Faye Hipsman and Doris Meissner, *In-Country Processing in Central America: A Piece of the Puzzle* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2015), <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/country-processing-central-america-piece-puzzle>.
- 19 Juliet Linderman, "Salvadoran Teens, after Years of Fearing Violence, Reunite with Parents under U.S. Program," Associated Press, November 17, 2015, www.usnews.com/news/us/articles/2015/11/17/salvadoran-teens-reunite-with-parents-under-us-program. For an overview of the in-country processing program, see Hipsman and Meissner, *In-Country Processing in Central America*.
- 20 See, for example, Sonia Nazario, "The Refugees at Our Door," *The New York Times*, October 25, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/10/11/opinion/sunday/the-refugees-at-our-door.html.

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Acknowledgments

This research has been made possible through the generous support of the Central America and Mexico Migration Alliance (CAMMINA), the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Open Society Foundations (OSF), and Unbound Philanthropy.

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Suggested citation: Rosenblum, Marc R. and Isabel Ball. 2016. *Trends in Unaccompanied Child and Family Migration from Central America*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

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