

Factors influencing decision making by people fleeing Central America

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Interviews with people who have fled violence in Central America reveal the influences behind their decision making prior to and during flight.

In late 2015, I conducted interviews with Central Americans staying at a shelter in Ciudad Ixtepec, a town in southern Mexico, and with Salvadorans who had been deported from Mexico and were now at a centre for returnees in Santa Tecla, El Salvador. All had fled the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA)¹ because of criminal violence and insecurity. The interviews reveal some of the reasoning behind people's decisions to flee and give a clear picture of, firstly, why internal flight is often not a viable option and, secondly, how learning about the right to asylum affects decisions taken during flight.²

Those interviewed had experienced slightly different levels of risk, depending on the types of threat they had experienced and the point at which they had escaped, and this appeared to result in different patterns of mobility.³ Some of the incidents they had experienced posed immediate risk, including attempted murder, serious physical assault and credible death threats. Others posed an imminent risk, including threats that a person would be killed if they refused to do something, such as join a gang or pay extortion. Credible death threats or attempted murder drove emergency flight to escape the immediate risk, while people also left their country in an evasive move to avoid the imminent risk of reprisals and violence: "The gangs want me to work with them. My family says that it is not safe for me to be there."⁴ Others made a pre-emptive move to avoid future risk.

Why internal migrations fail or are not attempted

The broader situation of insecurity within the NTCA means that internal relocation within one's own country is not a viable option for many people who are at risk. States' failure

to provide protection or resettlement results in internal relocations that are precarious and often unsuccessful, and the absence of an effective State presence has enabled non-State actors to usurp territorial control and act with impunity throughout the region. People from all three NTCA countries who moved internally prior to leaving the country said that they had experienced the same problems and insecurity after their internal relocation – and that this had resulted in their subsequent external migration.

Those who had fled immediate risk, such as attempted murder, reported more threats and personal insecurity after internal flight due to the communications networks of the gangs: "It's the same everywhere, and they know where you go. Better to leave the country." Those at imminent risk also expressed the futility of their internal flight. Internal displacement is often not sufficient because of the reach of criminal groups and their extensive communications networks. People's decisions to leave their countries were made expressly because of the danger they ran in their country of origin, their level of risk and the failure of the State to protect them.

Both internal displacement and flight into another NTCA country can also increase the risk to an individual. If someone relocates from one gang-controlled neighbourhood to one controlled by a rival gang, they will be at serious risk from both groups, even if not affiliated to either gang or to any other. Similarly, if they move to an area that is neutral but requires them to cross either gang's territory to visit relatives or go to work, their risk is heightened: "I moved from one neighbourhood to another, and going to visit my mother meant I had to return to the first neighbourhood. I couldn't

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just move – there were gangs, threats, the same – especially because I moved.”

Although having social capital – networks and relationships – in the destination location can help when relocating internally,⁵ none of the interviewees highlighted a lack of social capital as a barrier to successful internal flight, mentioning instead two significant barriers: a lack of State control that has resulted in the pervasive presence and territorial control of gangs, and an absence of effective State response and protection for people who have been forced to relocate internally.

There were also some people who had not experienced actual or threatened violence and did not attempt internal relocation before leaving their country but who made a pre-emptive move abroad to avoid extortion or because of a degrading local security situation. One Salvadoran family had moved before starting to pay extortion, explaining: “I couldn’t pay, because if you pay once, you have to pay forever – or end up face down.” Overall, their reasoning for their external migration was a lack of adequate State protection in their country of origin. Half of this group had social relationships and networks in their intended destination but this appeared to determine their destination rather than influence their decision to leave their countries.

How information about rights affects trajectory

There was scant prior awareness among the interviewees of the right to seek asylum or the fact that it could apply to their circumstances. At the migrant shelters they stay in along the way, people moving through Mexico receive varying amounts of information about their rights. All people staying at the shelter where I conducted interviews were informed during their initial registration interview of the right to apply for asylum. Many expressed surprise that such protection existed and could be applicable to them. One Salvadoran told me: “I never knew we had a right to be safe.”

One third of all interviewees who had fled death threats or forced recruitment decided to claim asylum in Mexico, changing their migration plans after being informed of this

right during transit. For some people without social capital and a specific destination who were fleeing certain death, the decision-making process became very straightforward and they cited just one factor: “I heard about the right to asylum.” One interviewee made dramatic changes to his plans after learning of the right to seek asylum. His initial plan was to take his 15-year-old stepson to the United States (US) to avoid forced recruitment and death threats, and then to return to Honduras to look after his family. He told me: “We arrived here in Ixtepec and they told us about the right to asylum, which I had never heard of before. I plan to go back to collect my family so that I can claim asylum with them all.” It is evident that lack of knowledge about asylum is a barrier to protection, and that the right to seek asylum could factor in migration decisions if there were widespread awareness of it in the country of origin.

Despite recognising that they could have a valid claim for asylum, however, some people chose instead to apply for a humanitarian visa (available for migrants who have been victims of or witness to a crime while in Mexico and – in theory at least – for asylum seekers⁶) either to regularise their stay in Mexico or to facilitate a safe journey through Mexico to the US. For those who decided to remain in Mexico, this decision was influenced chiefly by the Mexican authorities’ general refusal to accept applications for asylum and a humanitarian visa concurrently, meaning that applicants had to choose between one or the other. So even when people do receive information about international protection and their rights, my research suggests that many choose not to file claims in Mexico, despite acknowledging their potential eligibility.

Those with family or friends in a specific destination city were less likely to change their plans while in transit, demonstrating that social capital is also an important factor in the decision-making process

Final reflections

The interviews indicate that incidents resulting in immediate or imminent risk were the catalyst for people to leave their

homes but that structural factors – namely the lack of State protection in the country of origin – drove external migrations. External flight is being driven by a powerful trio of structural factors: the pervasive presence of organised criminal groups throughout the region, a lack of effective State control leading to the usurping of territorial control by organised criminal groups, and an absence of State response to people who are forced to relocate internally. Social capital and knowledge of one's rights may influence decisions along the way and so determine one's ultimate destination but migration controls and policies have little bearing on decision making when push factors are so overwhelming and flight so urgent.

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1. Also now referred to as Northern Central America.
2. Doctoral research funded through the Arts and Humanities Research Council.
3. While death threats affected people of all ages from 16 to 50, the majority of those fleeing forced recruitment or involvement in gang activities were in their teens and early twenties, and those fleeing extortion were all in their mid-twenties and included a family group. This suggests that certain activities adversely affect certain demographic groups but could also indicate that some groups are less tolerant of the same level of risk, resulting in different patterns of mobility. For instance, family groups may move pre-emptively even though faced with lower levels of risk from extortion.
4. All quotations are from men from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, ranging in age from 19 to 46, some accompanied by their family with minors in the group.
5. Cantor D J and Rodríguez Serna N R (Eds) (2016) *The New Refugees: Crime and Displacement in Latin America*, Ch 3
6. Mexico's Ley de Migración (2011) makes provision for a humanitarian visa for a foreign national who has been the victim of or witness to a crime while in Mexican territory and for asylum seekers but the latter is not being allowed in practice; see Human Rights Watch (2016) *Closed Doors: Mexico's Failure to Protect Central American Refugee and Migrant Children* <http://bit.ly/HRW-Mexico-2016> and Crisis Group (2016); *Easy Prey: Criminal Violence and Central American Migration*, Latin America Report No 57. <http://bit.ly/ICG-EasyPrey-2016>