

U.S. ASSISTANCE TO CENTRAL AMERICA PROMOTES SECURITY, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, AND RULE OF LAW

April 2021

Across Central America, dangerous levels of violence, corruption, poverty, and extreme weather driven by climate change have been among the root causes driving a broader regional challenge that has led families and unaccompanied children to leave their homes in Central America.

These factors pre-date COVID-19, but the health and economic impacts of the pandemic have only exacerbated the challenge. For example:

- In Guatemala and Honduras, half the country lives in poverty. The COVID-19 pandemic [doubled](#) the number of people facing hunger in Guatemala. In all three countries in Central America, there are close to 16 million people under the age of 24 – and nearly one-third of the youth are unemployed.
- Countries in the “Northern Triangle” in Central America are experiencing some of the highest murder rates in the world, with El Salvador having [one](#) of the highest homicide rates in the world.
- Studies have found a striking correlation: for every 10 murders in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, 6 children sought safety in the United States.
- As many as 2.1 million people in Central America, approximately 1% of the population, will likely be forced from their homes due to factors related to climate change by 2050, according to a World Bank study.

U.S. foreign assistance catalyzes regional investments and drives results

In 2014, the United States launched the “Alliance for Prosperity” – a regional initiative grounded in tough U.S. diplomatic engagement and sustained, targeted development investments. [An initial U.S. commitment of](#) \$750 million catalyzed more than \$5.4 billion in funding from the Northern Triangle countries – more than seven times the initial American commitment – to help their own people. By 2017, American assistance [helped](#) improve conditions throughout the region, and border-crossing apprehensions fell to their lowest point since 1971.

Yet this commitment was not sustained, and U.S. foreign assistance to Central America was suspended and decreased by nearly 30% from 2016 to 2019, when assistance to the Northern Triangle was just 0.035% of the current federal budget.

When U.S. foreign assistance is integrated into a comprehensive approach to the challenge, these investments improve safety and stability across the region.

- **Declining Homicide Rates:** Homicide rates [dropped](#) by 42% in El Salvador, 13% in Guatemala, and 23% in Honduras from 2015 to 2017, with even higher declines of up to 66% in El Salvador and 78% in Honduras in at-risk neighborhoods where USAID and the State Department targeted their programs.
- **Fighting Corruption:** The United States supports the Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH), an independent, international anti-corruption body that enables the work of judges, prosecutors, and investigators. The United States also supported a United Nations anti-corruption body set up in Guatemala 2007 to fight corruption, the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), which was terminated by the country in 2019.

- **Promoting Economic Development:** In the Western Highlands region of Guatemala, an area especially prone to migration based on [data](#) from U.S. Customs and Border Protection, USAID agricultural programming helped increase rural farmers' sales by 51% and created 20,000 jobs in agriculture.
- **Rebuilding After Natural Disasters:** Following back-to-back hurricanes in Central America in 2020 that caused severe flooding, landslides, and extensive damage to infrastructure, USAID [deployed](#) a Disaster-Assistance Response Team and allocated millions of dollars in life-saving aid to provide food, shelter, protection, and additional relief supplies to those affected.

OVERVIEW OF U.S. ASSISTANCE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

As of January 2021, approximately [1%](#) of all U.S. foreign assistance goes to Central America, the vast majority of which supports effective and accountable partnerships with vetted non-profit and civil society organizations. These groups run programs that promote economic and agricultural development, combat violence, empower youth, and fight corruption.

Only about [2%](#) of American assistance is provided as direct budget support to foreign governments around the world, according to the Congressional Research Service. Programs that support the efforts of Central American governments largely focus on strengthening law enforcement and security.

The following is a high-level summary of U.S. foreign assistance to countries in Central America where sustained investments have delivered results:

El Salvador: Strengthening Citizen Security and the Rule of Law

- As part of El Salvador's national security plan, USAID and State Department security programs targeted 50 municipalities by integrating law enforcement with community-level prevention. In neighborhoods where USAID worked in El Salvador, homicides [declined](#) by an average of 53% from 2015 to 2018.
- Through a \$5 million USAID investment to reform El Salvador's tax system, the El Salvadorian government [increased](#) its annual revenue by \$350 million and its annual social spending by \$160 million between 2005 and 2013.
- El Salvador successfully completed [a five-year \\$461 million compact](#) with the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) focused on education, energy, agriculture, rural business development, and infrastructure that is expected to benefit more than 700,000 people over 20 years – including more than 33,000 households gaining access to electricity.
- A second MCC compact of [\\$277 million](#) entered into force in 2015 and seeks to improve the competitiveness of the country's labor force, strengthen regulatory policies, and improve transportation infrastructure, with the El Salvadorian government contributing \$88 million to the five-year compact.
- USAID and WFP [partnered](#) to provide food assistance in El Salvador's Dry Corridor, a region plagued by extreme droughts and particularly vulnerable to climate change, which was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic and tropical storms Iota and Eta.

Guatemala: Promoting Economic Development and Fighting Poverty

- USAID agricultural programming helped increase rural farmers' sales by 51% and created 20,000 jobs in the agriculture sector. American assistance is helping to transform Guatemala into an economic partner, with U.S. agricultural exports to Guatemala increasing by 60% over the last decade.
- In 2018, only 64 of Guatemala's 340 cities had a prosecutor's office established. As the result of a partnership between USAID and Guatemala's Public Ministry to increase its nationwide coverage of prosecutors' offices, the number officially increased to 100% of Guatemala's municipalities in April 2021.
- U.S. assistance in Guatemala leveraged more than \$7 million in private investment, reaching 230,000 children under the age of 5 with nutritional support.

- Guatemala is a partner in a \$28 million [threshold program](#) with the MCC that seeks to improve tax administration, stimulate private funding for infrastructure, and train Guatemalan youth in valuable vocational skills.
- In response to Hurricane Iota's impact in Guatemala, USAID [provided](#) \$7 million to provide life-saving resources like emergency shelter, food, hygiene supplies, and critical relief items.

Honduras: Promoting Security and Fighting Corruption

- USAID and State Department community policing and youth programs helped reduce homicide rates in at-risk communities by up to 73% between 2013 and 2016.
- Through Feed the Future, USAID [investments](#) in agriculture have helped lift 89,000 people out of extreme poverty while also encouraging a \$56 million co-investment by the Honduran government in the program.
- Honduras is a partner in a [threshold program](#) with the MCC that seeks to develop the capacity of small-holder farmers and is expected to benefit more than 350,000 people. In addition, the partnership aims to help rehabilitate key transportation systems.
- Following the landfall of Hurricane Iota, USAID allocated [new funding](#) of up to \$8.5 million to provide emergency shelter, food, hygiene supplies, critical relief items, and protection for the most vulnerable people.

WHAT THEY ARE SAYING: BIPARTISAN SUPPORT FOR AID TO CENTRAL AMERICA

U.S. Congress

- **Senate Foreign Relations Ranking Member, James Risch (R-ID):** “Our nation has a strong and enduring national interest in a safe, prosperous and democratic Central America. Congress has responded to the crisis by supporting foreign assistance programs that address the root causes.”
- **Senate Foreign Relations Committee Member, Ben Cardin (D-MD):** “Our involvement in the Northern Triangle is critically important for many reasons. These are countries that have significant problems with corruption, and the United States is participating with the international community to try to root out the corruption in the Northern Triangle.”
- **Senate Foreign Relations Committee Member, Marco Rubio (R-FL):** “Reducing support to CentAm & closing the border with Mexico would be counterproductive.”
- **Senate Foreign Relations Committee Member, Rob Portman (R-OH):** “On the push-factors, I’m for that, but it’s going to take many years, some say a decade to make any substantial difference. So let’s begin the process.”
- **Speaker Nancy Pelosi:** “In order to keep people home, we have to address the root causes of the migration, and that’s not a big price to pay to have the impact that it will have.”
- **House Foreign Affairs Chairman Gregory Meeks (D-NY):** The key challenges and drivers of migration in Central America cannot be addressed without serious and constant dialogue between the United States and the governments of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. ... Now more than ever, strong, implementing partners are needed to help push the region to address countless crucial issues that the debilitating impacts of COVID 19 pandemic skyrocketing suicide rates, and to reignite anti-corruption and transparency initiatives.”
- **House Foreign Affairs Ranking Member, Mike McCaul (R-TX):** “One of the most effective tools we have for responding to [migration from the Northern Triangle] is targeted foreign assistance to Central America... U.S. assistance also promotes economic prosperity and strengthens democratic institutions and rule of law. This assistance merges security and economic support to create stability in the region and address root causes of illegal immigration.”

- **House Foreign Affairs Committee Member Albio Sires (D-NJ):** “Violence, impunity, inequality, and the impact of climate change are among the main push factors driving this trend [of migration from the Northern Triangle to the United States]. As the U.S. government takes in longer term, and more holistic approach to addressing migration, I believe that promoting democratic governance and human rights must be central.”

The Biden Administration

- **President Joe Biden:** “The long tradition of the United States as a leader in refugee resettlement provides a beacon of hope for persecuted people around the world, promotes stability in regions experiencing conflict, and facilitates international collaboration to address the global refugee crisis.”
- **Vice President Kamala Harris:** “Refugees are fleeing violence and oppression in Central America. We can help get to the root of these problems by making smart investments to provide humanitarian relief, and spur economic & civil reforms.”
- **Department of Homeland Security Secretary, Alejandro Mayorkas:** “When loving parents are willing to send their young child alone to traverse Mexico to reach the dangerous southern border ... because of the acute violence and the severe poverty and the fear of persecution, I think we need to address the push factor as the gravest challenge to irregular migration.”
- **Secretary of State, Tony Blinken:** “We will address the root causes of forced displacement and irregular migration, including by combatting corruption and impunity, upholding our obligations to protect refugees, and working collaboratively with our partners to promote opportunity and prosperity for people and communities across the region.”

National Security Leaders

- **Five Former Combatant Commanders of U.S. Southern Command:** “Improving conditions in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador is a critical way to address the root causes of migration and prevent the humanitarian crisis at our border. This is a solution to many of the drivers that cause people to leave their country and move north. Cutting aid to the region will only increase the drivers and will be even more costly to deal with on our border.”
– *General Craddock, General Hill, General McCaffrey, General Wilhelm, and Admiral Stavridis*

Former U.S. Government and Elected Officials

- **Former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Julian Castro:** “You have had thousands and thousands of people coming from these Northern Triangle countries fleeing violence, fleeing in this case the pandemic, looking for opportunity. That’s the way it has been and that’s the way it’s going to be unless the United States actually works with these countries to create more safety and better opportunity in those home countries...We must work with and invest in Northern Triangle countries so that families can find safety and opportunity there, instead of making the dangerous journey to the U.S.”
- **Former Congressman Will Hurd (R-TX):** “The root causes that are pushing illegal immigration from the Northern Triangle to the United States are extreme poverty, lack of economic opportunity, and violence.”