



Factors driving Salvadoran youth migration: A formative assessment focused on Salvadoran repatriation facilities☆



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ABSTRACT

Background: Beginning in early 2014, the United States' southern border was flooded with an unprecedented number of Central American migrant youth attempting to enter the United States. In response to the influx of immigrants, the Obama administration requested \$3.7 billion in emergency funding to be allocated to border security, detention, removal, immigration courts, and care for children. We conducted this research with the aims of identifying and understanding push factors for Salvadoran youth migration and of raising awareness of the need for services among recently deported youths.

Methods: Data for this mixed-methods study are drawn from field research conducted in El Salvador between 2014 and 2015. We conducted direct observation and 14 in-depth semi-structured interviews with case workers. We analyzed quantitative data from the Salvadoran respondents to the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) and data from the Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería (DGME).

Results: In the context of an intergenerational culture of migration, case workers describe how family reunification, security, coyote payment, and socioeconomic factors contribute as push factors for Salvadoran youth migration. Quantitative data illustrate a spike in youth repatriated by land in July 2014, and family reunification, insecurity, and economic factors were primary push factors reported for youths repatriated to El Salvador via land.

Conclusions: This assessment of Salvadoran youth migration push factors relied on interview data provided by case workers who have processed the multiple complex stories of youths at risk for migration. Quantitative data triangulated findings that show how family reunification, violence, and socioeconomic factors act within an intergenerational culture of migration to push Salvadoran youths into a dangerous migration attempt. Our findings can be used to inform the development of strategies to provide services to Salvadoran youths at risk for future migration and to generate mechanisms for providing those services.

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1. Introduction

The United States invests significant resources in detaining and deporting migrants. From 1986 through 2012, the U.S. government has spent an estimated \$186.8 billion on immigration enforcement, and it currently spends more on immigration enforcement agencies than all other principal criminal federal law enforcement agencies combined (Meissner, Kerwin, Chishti, & Bergeron, 2013). Despite these measures, there have been recent surges in unaccompanied children traveling across the Mexico–U.S. border (The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), 2014).

The 1.1 million Salvadorans living in the United States represent the largest immigrant group from the Northern Triangle region of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) and number approximately one-fifth of the total population of El Salvador (Terrazas, 2010). An estimated 140,000 Salvadorans engage in undocumented migration attempts each year (Gaborit, Zetino, Brioso, & Portillo, 2012). Emigration of Salvadorans to the United States began increasing dramatically during El Salvador's civil war (1979–1992) (Hamilton & Chinchilla, 1991) and continues today. Beginning in early 2014, the United States' southern border was flooded with an unprecedented number of Central American migrant youths attempting to enter the United States. In response to the influx of immigrants, the Obama administration requested \$3.7 billion in emergency funding to be allocated to border security, detention, removal, immigration courts, and care for children. This included funding that would address the root causes of the immigration issue, including economic, social, governance, and security conditions that contribute to increased immigration (The White House, 2014).

As solutions are sought to address the root causes of the immigration issue, it is important to consider the population of youths who are

☆ CONNA, Consejo Nacional de la Niñez y de la Adolescencia (National Council for Childhood and Adolescence); DGME, Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería (General Directorate of Migration and Foreigners); LAPOP, Latin American Public Opinion Project; NGO, nongovernmental organization.

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already mobilized into an undocumented migration attempt. The mobility of children across borders is a worldwide phenomenon that often reflects the demographic reality that families are split between countries (Carling, Menjivar, & Schmaltzbauer, 2012; Chavez & Menjivar, 2010). Unaccompanied minors in the United States risk detainment in facilities with juvenile offenders, separation from their families, and lack of information about their rights (Chavez & Menjivar, 2010). Upon return to El Salvador, repatriated migrants face stigma (Gaborit et al., 2012). The risks of detainment and deportation, coupled with the questionable effectiveness and deleterious impacts of these strategies, warrant the development of new strategies concerning youth migration and attention to developing services for youths at risk of migration as well as for youths who have been recently deported from Mexico or the United States.

Many studies have attended to the phenomenon of Central American migration to the United States as well as the struggles faced by the migrants (Carling et al., 2012; Hamilton & Chinchilla, 1991; Locke, Southwick, McCloskey, & Fernández-Esquer, 1996; Menjivar, 2012; Menjivar & Abrego, 2009). In one study of Salvadoran youths located throughout La Unión and Chalatenango, the transnational undocumented migration process was broken down into the advisory, deliberative, and reactive phases of migration (Gaborit et al., 2012). Deportation, insertion, adaptation, acculturation, and assimilation could occur within the reactive phase (Gaborit et al., 2012). In this present study, we are particularly interested in youths who have undergone deportation, as there is a lack of applied literature that provides the groundwork for developing programs and service alternatives to the current strategies of apprehension, detention, and deportation. Therefore, beginning in late 2014, RTI International conducted a formative assessment of factors driving youth migration from El Salvador to the United States, focusing primarily on interviews with case workers who work with recently returned/deported Salvadoran youths. Our data included both qualitative, semistructured interviews with Salvadoran case workers and secondary data analysis of public data sources to examine push factors for Salvadoran youth migration, with a specific focus on identifying solutions for the development of services. A study of this nature carries implications for developing services for recently deported youths whose experiences may have deleterious effects on the self and on the social and familial networks in which youths are located.

2. Methods

Data for this mixed-methods study are drawn from field research conducted in El Salvador in 2014–2015, during the period immediately following a large influx of Central American immigrants to the United States. We conducted semistructured interviews with individuals who had experience with both recently deported youths and the systems (governmental and civil sector) that provide services to recently deported Salvadoran youths. We conducted 14 semistructured interviews with individuals who could provide information within this spectrum, primarily case workers and program managers at repatriation centers in El Salvador. (For simplicity, we identify our participants as “case workers” throughout the remainder of this article.) In addition to formal interviews, direct observation was conducted. Informal interviews were held (but not audio recorded) in the context of this direct observation. We also analyzed data from the Salvadoran respondents to the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) (AmericasBarometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP)) and from the Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería (General Directorate of Migration and Foreigners; DGME) (Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería (DGME)).

For the qualitative research, we adopted a grounded theory approach in which we systematically coded and analyzed data for emergent themes. Such an approach emphasizes the interplay between data collection and analysis, and it promotes the emergence of theory from

data (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in the language of the interview. Interviews with 14 case workers were conducted in their preferred language (Spanish or English) in November and December 2014, the months immediately after the 2014 influx period. For coding, interview transcripts were not translated, but all codes were written in English. Transcripts were produced from each interview and uploaded into Atlas.ti. (ATLAS.ti Qualitative Analytic Software, 2008). Open codes were first developed for the text. Open codes were used to produce a set of axial codes that were then used to develop theoretical codes to structure the results and discussion sections of this manuscript. Peer debriefing of axial and theoretical coding was conducted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

We supplemented findings from the qualitative interviews with analyses of existing data from LAPOP (AmericasBarometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP)) and DGME (Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería (DGME)). Every 2 years, LAPOP conducts the AmericasBarometer survey in countries throughout North, Central, and South America and the Caribbean. The surveys are nationally representative and cover issues related to citizen security and democracy. We extracted data collected in El Salvador in 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, and 2012 related to the economy, crime and victimization, living abroad, and perceptions of quality of life and the state of the nation. We calculated annual means and percentages to help us better understand issues impacting Salvadoran residents during this time period. DGME provided monthly data on the numbers of youths who were repatriated during 2013 and 2014 as well as their self-reported primary motivations for migrating. We calculated monthly means and percentages to identify trends in and motivations for migration.

3. Results

Monthly data from DGME show that the total number of youths repatriated monthly to El Salvador remained relatively constant throughout 2013 before increasing dramatically in early 2014 and peaking in July 2014 (Fig. 1). The number of ground repatriations (deportees from Mexico) declined during the second half of 2014, returning to numbers comparable to those observed in 2013.

During repatriation, youths are asked the primary reason for emigrating. As shown in Fig. 2, the most common responses in 2013 and 2014 were family reunification, economic factors, and insecurity. The percentage of youths who cited insecurity as a primary motivation increased dramatically over time, with a concomitant decline in economic factors citations. Qualitative interviews confirmed these push factors and provided additional detail about the situations under which youths decide to migrate. In the 2012 LAPOP data, 23.5% of respondents expressed intentions of migrating within the next 3 years.

Qualitative interview participants described push factors for Salvadoran youths within historical and structural contexts. Within this framework, participants discussed the intergenerational culture of migration as well as contemporary push factors including family reunification, violence and insecurity, and socioeconomic circumstances. The case workers also discussed the role of coyotes and the risks of the land migration route.

3.1. Intergenerational culture of migration

Participants described an intergenerational culture of migration associated with El Salvador's current youth migration phenomenon. During the 1979–1992 civil war, El Salvador's leftist guerilla faction (opposed by both the Salvadoran Army and the United States) predominantly occupied departments (states) of the country that currently show high rates of youth migration to the United States. These departments include San Miguel, Usulután, La Unión, Morazán, and Chalatenango. The United States was a frequent destination for Salvadorans fleeing the insecurity in these regions during the civil war, with many entering the United States undocumented. During this

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