



Rootedness to prevent forced migration

KEY FINDINGS FROM A CRS STUDY ON PUSH AND RETENTION FACTORS FOR MIGRATION IN GUATEMALA

In the past five years, northward migration from Central America has sharply increased. As the number of migrants grows, the profile of migrants has also shifted, with an increase in the number of migrants from vulnerable populations. While the traditional migrant profile is a young single male, recent years have seen more women, unaccompanied minors, and even entire families migrating north in search of asylum, better opportunities, and a more dignified life.

As migrants' profile and migratory patterns shift, so too have the motivations and circumstances that drive people from their homes. In 2020, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) commissioned a large study (n= 874) in communities where CRS implements programs in Guatemala to better understand the profile of the 'new migrant'. Compared to many analyses of the past, the study examined not only the causes that drive people to leave but more critically, the factors that encourage them to stay in their communities. The low perceived risk by study participants of the U.S. border patrol, detention camps, and a global pandemic demonstrates that migration will persist despite these risks and that punitive measures are ineffective to quell the flow of migration. By better understanding and investing in the factors that help people root and thrive in their communities we can address migration in a more effective and humane way.

WHAT ARE THE LATEST DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS IN MIGRATION?

While many traditional factors—violence, lack of economic opportunities, and climate change— continue to drive migration, several findings indicate new factors and complexities are driving migration and its changing profile. These include:

- Those with **greater education levels are more likely to express the intention to migrate**. Among those who expressed intention to migrate 29% had not finished elementary school as compared to 49% of those who did not express intention to migrate.
- Although males are more likely to express intention to migrate overall (15% of men versus 9% of women), this significant gender disparity disappears among the population under 30 and especially for those with higher education, leading to a **feminization of migration** and a 'female brain drain.'
- Socioeconomic status as measured by a poverty index did not have a significant quantitative association with intention to migrate. However, this study found that people living in extreme poverty and food insecurity were more likely to be undecided. While these individuals often do not have the resources to make the journey using traditional means, when they make the decision to migrate, they may be more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation

Rootedness factors

- Education and training connected to formal jobs.
- Community engagement/ leadership for development opportunities.
- Access and management of land for sustainable and adaptive agriculture.
- Stable, formal employment.

Push factors

- Unemployment/ lack of formal employment
- Inequitable access to arable land and perceived threat of natural disasters
- Discrimination and feeling undervalued in one's community.

WHAT HELPS PEOPLE STAY IN THEIR COMMUNITIES?

Of 785 people surveyed, 77% had little or no intention to migrate from their communities. Among this population, we identified the shared factors that promoted rootedness or the desire to remain in one's community of origin:

- Access to basic health and educational services and stable and formal jobs, especially for young people
- Access to formal education and other types of training when linked to profitable job opportunities
- Access and management of fertile land and the ability to sustain harvests and adapt to climate change to improve agricultural productivity
- Community participation and leadership when linked to opportunities that directly improve living conditions.

It is important to note the conditionality of the findings. Education and community leadership/engagement alone do not promote rootedness; they must be attached to economic and social development opportunities. These conditions should push policy makers and implementers alike to design comprehensive outcome-based programs that promote the factors that contribute to community rootedness.

THE GREATEST PREDICTORS OF MIGRATION ARE LACK OF JOBS, PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION, AND GREATER EXPECTATIONS FOR CHANGE

Lack of dignified work, perceived discrimination, and greater expectations for change (expressed as a desire for a better life) were significantly correlated with intention to migration while the relationship with poverty was unclear. The study found stronger linkages between occupation and intention to migrate than socioeconomic status and intention to migrate. People who worked as day laborers in agriculture, construction, and as domestic workers had a greater intention to migrate, followed by students and the unemployed.

Experiencing discrimination was one of the greatest predictors of migratory intention. When the intention was analyzed as a continuum from the 'certainty' of migration to the total rejection of the migratory option, the most important push factors were related to discrimination and exclusion within communities. Almost 50% of those who intended to migrate felt undervalued in their communities, significantly more than those who intended to stay.

“The pandemic affected us at the beginning, 2-3 months ago, but now that everything has opened again in the U.S., people are working normally, now it doesn't affect the migration” - study participant, Quiché Guatemala

COVID-19 DELAYED, BUT DID NOT REMOVE THE INTENTION TO MIGRATE

COVID-19 has exacerbated many of the causes that push people to migrate. In Guatemala, where, according to the World Bank, 80% of workers are employed in the informal economy, curfews and restrictions on group gatherings and travel have caused many vulnerable populations to lose desperately needed employment and income. Acute malnutrition has tripled since the beginning of the crisis and maternal and childhood mortality rates are similarly expected to increase.

As the long-term impacts of COVID-19 continue to be realized, CRS will focus their programmatic efforts on the following:

- Increased direct cash transfer programs that allow families to meet their immediate needs and mitigate existing and impending food crises
- Increased access to agricultural inputs and training in climate smart agricultural techniques that increase production and income for farmer families and build resilience and food security
- Job skills training combined with cash assistance that allow youth to meet their basic needs while receiving training keeps youth engaged and provides a pathway to formal employment.

THE MIGRANT PROFILE

LOWER INTENTION TO MIGRATE

- More likely to be housewives or employed with skilled labor
- Have access to employment in their community (except for those involved in agricultural daylabor who have a higher intention to migrate)
- More rooted in their communities
- Strong perception of risks associated with the journey
- Participate in community development activities
- Greater fear of contracting COVID-19



UNDECIDED

- More likely to be day laborers, unemployed skilled labor, or those without formal employment opportunities
- Higher levels of unemployment and lower levels of education
- Greater attraction to the migratory destination
- Strong agricultural ties, more impacted by climate change and failed harvests
- Discouraged at future prospects and show little optimism
- Fear of detention in migratory process



HIGHER INTENTION TO MIGRATE

- More likely to be young
- Greater presence of highly educated students and day laborers
- Achieved a higher level of education but remain unemployed because of few available jobs matching their education levels
- More optimistic about the future and their own capacity to create change
- Increased intention to migrate in search of better and more fulfilling job opportunities



“Migration in Guatemala will not decrease unless the root conditions that cause it are addressed” - **Alvaro Gomez, Tierra Nueva**

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE UNDECIDED

One in five people surveyed was undecided. They were also among the most vulnerable.

Across indicators, people who were undecided about migration were more vulnerable than both those who wanted to migrate and those who wanted to remain. These vulnerability factors include:

- Lower levels of schooling
- More severe food insecurity
- Higher levels of extreme poverty
- A lower degree of social participation in their community
- A lower perception of self-efficacy



Among the poorest and most vulnerable of those surveyed, they were likely to be undecided because 1) they did not have the material or social resources required to realistically imagine migrating yet and 2) relative to those who are content to remain in their communities, they suffered from more difficult circumstances that increased the need to migrate for better opportunities.

STUDY RESULTS BY KEY CHARACTERISTICS

POVERTY

Although the study did not find a statistically significant relationship between economic status and intention to migrate, qualitative evidence suggests that the poorest families are less likely to migrate because they lack the required resources to make the journey. This is especially true for the extremely poor who do not have land or assets to rent or sell to raise additional resources. While these families may express a desire to migrate, they also lack the immaterial resources (connections in the U.S., knowledge of migration route) to bolster confidence in the journey. Thus, it stands that those with some means (intermediate poverty levels) in search of better economic opportunities have a greater possibility to pursue migration. Notably, the caravan phenomenon significantly reduced the resources and planning required to migrate and thus, increased the proportion of the extremely poor who migrated.

EDUCATION & JOBS

In line with previous studies that have been conducted, people who expressed intention to migrate tended to possess a higher level of education. Among those who expressed intention to migrate 29% had not finished elementary school as compared to 49% of those who did not express intention to migrate. While most people surveyed (84%) are literate, the intention to migrate among those who are literate is 23% as compared to those who reported being illiterate 19%. This exhibits that while education is a worthwhile community investment, it must be attached to jobs to help people thrive and remain in their communities.

For educated youth, migration is seen as one of their only options for advancing their skills and lives. Despite having much higher education levels than their rural peers, only 11% of urban youth interviewed had access to formal employment. The perception of the difficulty in securing a job in Guatemala is indirect contrast to the belief that it is relatively easy to secure work in the U.S., especially among youth.

Qualitative data indicates that migration has replaced education and work as a means of social mobility given the lack of employment and development opportunities in communities across Guatemala. Migration is often seen as the only way to improve living conditions, advance personal capacity, and realize one's dreams and aspirations.

YOUTH & GENDER

Youth aged 25-30 have the highest intention to migrate (28%). Overall, men have more intention to migrate than women, with 15% of men versus 9% of women reporting intention to migrate. The difference becomes insignificant for those under 30, with men and women equally interested in migration. Even though women are exposed to increased sexual violence and abuse along the migratory route, young women (under 30), especially those who were more educated, reported the same level of intention to migrate as male peers.

This can be linked to two factors: 1) higher education in younger women which is a push factor when they have no job opportunities and 2) social pressure to remain for older women with families. One of the rootedness factors, community participation tied to opportunities for development, is significantly lower for women. This is likely due to the fact that women in rural communities hold fewer positions of power in community structures and leadership (71% of surveyed women do not participate in community committees) due to patriarchal norms. Programs invested in increasing women's participation in community leadership could also increase their desire to stay in their communities.

LAND ACCESS & CLIMATE CHANGE

Results from qualitative interviews highlighted that for many farmers in Guatemala, migration has become a coping strategy to deal with increasingly problematic trends in agriculture. Poor farmers suffer from:

- Lack of ownership of fertile land
- Lack of resources required to invest in irrigation and/or inputs to improve the productivity of the land
- Lack of knowledge on the most effective practices to mitigate the effects of climate change and natural disasters
- Lack of access to fair and formal credit to invest in the land
- Low and unpredictable wages associated with agricultural day labor



Climate change is exacerbating the situation, with unpredictable storms and increased droughts and flooding damaging farmers' harvests. Forty percent of those surveyed reported they had been harmed by recent climate events. Those most severely affected by climatic events suffered from greater food insecurity and showed a greater intention to migrate. As climate change continues to worsen globally, especially in Guatemala—one of the most climate vulnerable countries in the world—we anticipate an increasing number of 'climate migrants.'

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

When surveyed on factors related to community ties and social networks, nearly all participants (95%) expressed attachment to their communities, noting that they value their communities and would feel sad if they left their communities. However, community participation and a feeling of attachment alone do not increase rootedness; only when community engagement and leadership activities are combined with efforts such as, improved livelihoods, income opportunities, access to fertile land, do they support increased rootedness.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- 1. Develop a just and humane migration strategy.** The U.S. administration should develop a strategy toward the northern countries of Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras) that prioritizes addressing the push factors of migration and promoting the rootedness factors. While such programs to increase rootedness will primarily target those who are more educated and well-off, the strategy should also address the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable communities and prioritize robust consultation with local, national, and international stakeholders, including faith-based organizations.
- 2. Increase humanitarian and development funding in the region for programs that address push factors and promote rootedness factors.** Evidence generated from CRS programs and this migration study demonstrate that programs that invest in growing formal job opportunities, gender equity (especially in decision-making spaces), climate adapted agricultural practices, job-relevant education and training, and social inclusion of the most marginalized populations (women, indigenous, youth, among others) in decision-making spaces can decrease the intention to migrate by increasing rootedness factors. Rather than focusing on deterring migration, Congress and the Administration should appropriate and allocate resources to build prosperous and safe communities where people can achieve a dignified life for themselves and their families.
- 3. The U.S. Administration should request, and the U.S. Congress should provide supplemental resources for the international response to COVID-19.** COVID-19 has exacerbated all the factors that push people to migrate and yet fear of catching the virus has not reduced migrant flows significantly. The secondary impacts of the pandemic on food security, poverty, and unemployment have yet to be realized in Central America. Any additional funds appropriated should focus on the groups most vulnerable to the economic hardship and lost opportunities produced by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 4. Focus development strategies on improving conditions for women and youth.** In partnership with local organizations and large-scale development agencies like CRS, and in alignment with USAID country development cooperation strategies (CDCS), U.S. assistance should add youth and gender-sensitive components and outcomes to its primary programming. Youth are the most likely to migrate and women are migrating at an increasing rate. While many initiatives currently prioritize youth and women, tying them to specific outcomes like formal employment and community engagement/ leadership to increase development opportunities will more effectively promote rootedness.
- 5. Support institutional partnerships that increase employment opportunities.** Increase investment in job placement programs that broker connections between young people, vocational training, and stable job opportunities. Incorporating partnerships with the private and public sectors to provide a pipeline of stable employment is critical for helping youth remain in their home countries by creating prosperous and dignified careers.
- 6. Promote community engagement/leadership as a tenet in all development programs.** While nearly all participants felt tied to their communities, it did not prevent migration unless community participation inspired opportunities for social and economic development. Funding should be allocated to local community leadership programs to increase community social capital. Additional funding should be allocated to promote greater community engagement and leadership for women and youth.

STUDY METHODOLOGY & MANAGEMENT

- Household surveys were conducted with 785 households in rural communities across Guatemala and 89 surveys were conducted with urban youth in San Juan Sacatepéquez.
- The surveys collected information on demographic and socioeconomic push and rootedness factors influencing the intention to migrate.
- Data were analyzed at the individual and group level and regression analyses were used to determine the weight of different factors on the likelihood of migration and develop profiles of those most and least likely to migrate.
- Qualitative interviews were conducted with 96 study participants, including 12 key informants.

CRS is applying this information to improve humanitarian and development programming and counts on the support of the U.S. government to ensure evidence-based and effective resource investment to prevent forced migration in Central America



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Link to Spanish summary of the Study Results: [Entre el arraigo y decisión de migrar](#)
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