



Safe at home

U.S. POLICY TOWARD CENTRAL AMERICA

*“I will lie down and sleep in peace,
for You alone, O LORD, make me
dwell in safety” (Psalm 4:8).*

This spring, people around the world have been exhorted to stay in their homes to keep themselves and their neighbors safe from the novel coronavirus. Physically distancing ourselves from each other is crucially important to slowing the spread of the virus—but as people around the world adjust to stay-at-home measures, we see a sharp divide between those for whom home is a safe refuge and those who face the threat of danger in their home communities.

Tens of thousands of Central American migrants leave their homes each year because home isn't safe. The root causes that drive migration also make populations particularly vulnerable to health emergencies. Poverty makes it impossible to stock up on food and hygiene supplies. Corruption diverts funds intended for hospitals, where overworked doctors and nurses lack the beds, medicine and equipment they need. Violence remains a threat, including the state-sanctioned violence that occurs when military patrol the streets.

Understanding the risks our Central American neighbors face helps us to respond—advocating to the U.S. government for more compassionate policies that help people everywhere feel safe. ✨

Kate Parsons

The view from La Tigra, a national park near Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

The **roots** of poverty and violence in Central America

by Kate Parsons

It's misleading to say that Central America is poor. Countries like El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras are rich in beauty and natural resources. Coral reefs, pine forests and grasslands host a diversity of wildlife. People maintain elements of cultural heritage that stretch back for centuries. Unfortunately, for hundreds of years the vibrancy of this region has attracted foreign governments or business owners who have exploited and impoverished its people.

Christopher Columbus landed in Trujillo, Honduras in 1502 on his last voyage to the Americas. After this, Spaniards spread out through the region, claiming land and gold that was not theirs, waging war and spreading disease. Three hundred

and some odd years later, the Spaniards left, and U.S. banana companies flexed their control in the spaces they left behind.

Chiquita and Dole may not rule Central America with the power they used to, but U.S. interests continue to dominate. Trade policies privilege international corporations. Mining and hydroelectric companies strip natural resources and displace entire communities. Wealthy elites and politicians conspire to make systems work for those with money and guns and power, just as they've done for 500 years.

This history of extraction is lost when U.S. policymakers tout poverty-reduction strategies that ignore structural weaknesses and inequalities. Poverty is one of the root causes that drives migration toward the United States. But money or even jobs won't be enough to lift communities out of poverty when wealthy countries continue to tip the scales in their favor.

U.S. policies toward Central America

MCC listens to partner organizations in Central America to understand which U.S. policies make the biggest impact on the daily lives of people in these countries. The following policies could help make communities in Central America safer and more prosperous.

Make foreign assistance smart and sustainable. The United States spends less than 1% of its annual budget on foreign assistance, money that goes to support poverty and violence reduction programs around the world. Politicians on both the left and the right have cited this funding as a wise investment, contributing to

human well-being and international stability. Despite this bipartisan support, however, in early 2019, the Trump administration cut all foreign assistance to Central America, saying the region wasn't doing enough to stop migration. While some aid has since restarted, this interruption in programming limits the success of programs addressing root causes that contribute to migration in the first place.

Providing job skills trainings

María Socorro Pineda (middle) stands with her daughter Evelin Lopez Pineda (17) and son Herson Alfredo Pineda (13) at their house. The family left with a migrant caravan in October 2018 but were forced by illness to come back home. CASM, or Mennonite Social Action Commission, helps families like María's reintegrate to Honduras after they are deported or return to Honduras. Unemployment in Honduras is high, and strict regulations and limited access to capital make it difficult to start a business. Through seed capital for entrepreneurship and vocational classes, CASM helps young adults and families find a future in Honduras. "Migration is a right," says CASM's migration program manager Mercedes Pérez. "But it shouldn't be an obligation."



Mitigating the effects of climate change

MCC photo/Jill Steinmetz

Melvin Sanchez stands beside metal barrels that allow him to store grain as insurance for the seasons when his harvest fails. MCC supports farmers like Melvin through their partner organization, CODESO (Social Development Committee), a cooperative dedicated to supporting Honduran farmers as they grapple with uncertain harvests in a changing climate. CODESO works to mitigate climate change's impact by teaching farmers sustainable agriculture methods and providing support through techniques like cooperative savings banks.

MCC photo/Jill Steinmetz





MCC photo/Anna Vogt

Strengthening community response to extractive industries

Active mineral extraction ended in 2017 at the Canadian-owned Goldcorp Marlin Mine near San Miguel Ixtahuacn, Guatemala, but the clean-up has yet to be completed. Local communities are concerned that the mine will expand operations in other parts of the municipality. MCC partner Pastoral de la Tierra (Land Ministry of the Dioceses of San Marcos) supports communities as they seek to respond to the social, economic and environmental impacts of the mine. The Land Ministry works to promote sustainable local economies through improved and diversified household food production, popular education, and youth organizing and development.

- Now more than ever, the United States should maintain consistent foreign assistance to Central America, particularly aid that addresses livelihoods, climate change adaptation and non-militarized violence reduction strategies.

Support civil society. Civil society refers to the churches, nonprofit organizations, activist groups and service providers that make up the “third sector” outside of government and private business. In Central America, civil society groups have a long history of filling in gaps created by weak or corrupt governments. Civil society groups—including MCC partners—run migrant shelters, host peacemaking trainings, and lead community organizing and advocacy, among many other things. This work is risky—dozens of activists have been assassinated in Central America alone in the last few years. As civil society organizations close their doors during quarantine measures, significant gaps are exposed, and marginalized groups are even more vulnerable.

- The United States should financially support community development and local civil society organizations who have the best understanding of the needs and priorities of local communities.
- The United States should call for the protection of civil society leaders, conditioning govern-

ment assistance on documented improvement in transparency and protection of journalists, activists and civil society leaders.

Advocating for change in Central America

Central America isn't poor. It is rich—in faith, courage, creativity and persistence. Migrants bring these gifts as they travel through Mexico and into the United States. These gifts address poverty at its root and contribute to a future where everyone may choose whether to migrate or remain safe at home.

Guatemalans, Hondurans and Salvadorans are already deeply involved in the work of transforming their homes, but they shouldn't have to do it alone. As U.S. citizens, we have a unique opportunity to influence policies in our country that promote safety and flourishing abroad.

This work is needed now more than ever. The global coronavirus pandemic not only shines a light on systemic weaknesses and vulnerabilities around the world, it shows us that collective action is possible. We are able to do remarkable things for the health and safety of others—we should be sure that this compassion extends to our neighbors in Central America. ✱

Visit mcc.org/safe-refuge to learn more and to take action. With just a few clicks, you can ask your member of Congress to address the root causes of poverty, violence and migration from Central America. Your voice makes a difference!



Photo courtesy of ANADES

Empowering women through community participation

Ana Iris Constante, of the Los Montes community of Cuisnahuat municipality in El Salvador, shown here in a 2016 community assessment to learn about the results and challenges related to climate change and food security. Constante is one of more than 300 female political advocates in Cuisnahuat municipality who are supported by MCC through partner Asociación Nuevo Amanecer de El Salvador (ANADES; New Dawn Association of El Salvador). The women receive training on how to speak about social issues in their communities. ANADES supports women's collectives across the country, including their work on gender equity, community health, agroecology and youth.

Worship resources

Call to worship, based on Psalm 146

Praise God with your whole being!
I will praise God as long as I live!

Don't trust the plans of humanity.
Only God's expansive love is eternal.

Praise God!
We praise the creator,
the God of Jacob.
The one who straightens the bent,
who loves the hungry and poor.

Praise God!
We are here to praise our God,
who protects the immigrant,
who helps the orphan and widow.

Praise God!
Praise the creator whose love
flows from
generation to generation until all is
as God dreams it can be.

Praise God!

—Written by Tim Graves, posted on
liturgybits.com

Songs

Sing the Journey 8, “Somos pueblos
que camina” (We are people on
a journey)

Hymnal: A Worship Book 322,
“For we are strangers no more”
“Jesus, See the Traveler” by Sara
Groves

Sing the Journey 4, “You’ve got a
place (at the welcome table)”

Children's time

The leader may ask the children if they have ever moved. If so, allow them to share what the experience was like. Explain that sometimes families move because they want to do so. Other times they move because they have no other choice. Then, read a story such as *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale* by Duncan Tonatiuh or *Two White Rabbits* by Jairo Buitrago.

Or, if immigrants or refugees attend your congregation, you may want to invite them to share parts of their story in an interview format. You may want to ask questions such as: How old were you when you moved to the U.S.? Why did you come to the U.S.? What is your first memory of being in the U.S.? What are things that you enjoyed doing in your home country? Plan this out in advance to allow the people being interviewed to determine what they are comfortable sharing with the children and congregation.

Benediction

May you go out looking for those who don't have a place to stay. Remember that Joseph and Mary had to run for their lives and the life of infant Jesus. Remember that Jesus never found a place to rest his head. And remember that we are all immigrants in this world, foreigners and nomads here on earth. Open the doors for each other, prepare a table for each other and offer hospitality to all without asking for their documents or their origin. May the peace of Christ be with us all.

—Adapted from *Christian Churches Together, Worship Service for Immigrants*

Additional worship resources at mcc.org/safe-refuge.

IMPORTANT ADDRESSES

Senator _____
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510
(202) 224-3121
senate.gov

Representative _____
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515
(202) 224-3121
house.gov

President Donald Trump
The White House
Washington, DC 20500
(202) 456-1111
whitehouse.gov/contact

Please note that congressional offices are still receiving emails and phone calls during this time.

GET INVOLVED!

- Check out our website at washington.mcc.org.
- Sign up to receive **action alerts** and the monthly **E-Memo**.
- Follow us on **Twitter** at twitter.com/mccwashington.

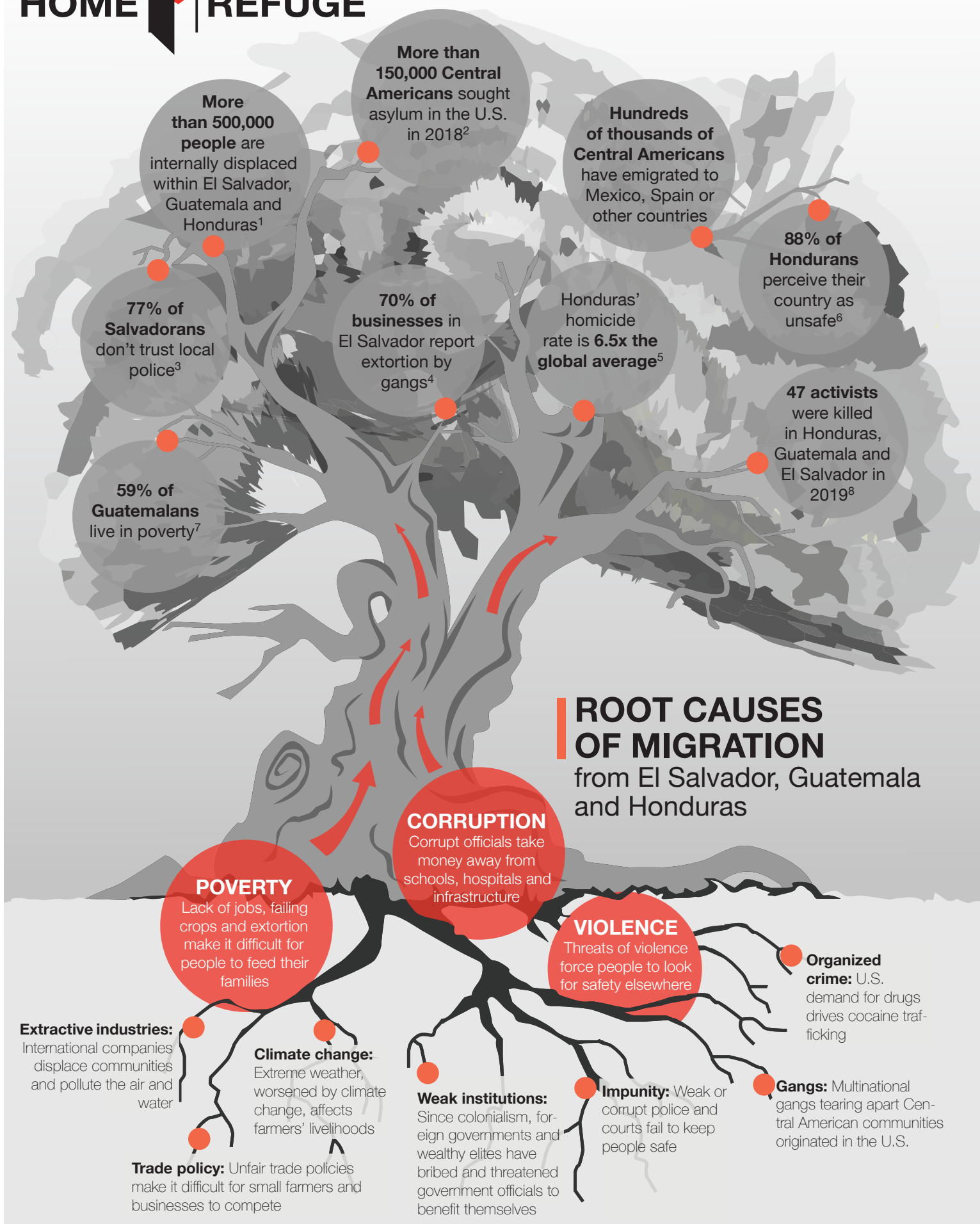
UPCOMING EVENTS

In light of COVID-19, plans are constantly being updated. Subscribe to our monthly electronic newsletter, the E-Memo, to be sure you have the most up-to-date information on webinars and other events that we are sponsoring.

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All biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.



32 million people live in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador

Most would choose to stay home under conditions of peace and dignity

HELPING COMMUNITIES FLOURISH

Policy recommendations

Mennonite Central Committee works with people to provide alternatives to migration, supports people on the journey and helps people resettle into new homes. We support U.S. foreign policies that address the root causes of migration and contribute to transparency, flourishing and peace in Central America.

Transparency and accountability from elected officials

Access to health care and education

Trust in police and local leaders

Opportunities to work and start businesses

Safety in homes and communities

100 YEARS | MCC

mcc.org/saferefuge

Address drug trafficking and organized crime by **investing in drug prevention and treatment programs** in the U.S.

Support **community violence prevention programs** to reduce the influence of gangs

Protect and support local civil society actors, journalists and activists

Help farmers **adapt to climate change** and **reduce the U.S. contribution** to climate change

Increase accountability in police and investigative bodies and **promote judicial independence**

Ensure that mega-projects by international companies **do not harm communities or the environment**

Condition bilateral support on **reduction of corruption** and **strengthening of public institutions**

Use trade relationships to **promote adequate labor standards** and environmental conditions

1 <https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-datal>

2 Report "Central American Migration: Current Changes and Development Implications," Inter-American Dialogue, November 2018

3 Source: University Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP), José Simeón Cañas Central American University (UCA) <http://www.uca.edu.sv/iudop/wp-content/uploads/BOLEVAL2019PPT.pdf>

4 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/30/el-salvador-gang-violence-ms13-nation-held-hostage-photography/>

5 <https://iudpas.unah.edu.hn/observatorio-de-la-violencia/boletines-del-observatorio-2/boletines-nacionales/> Source: University Institute for Democracy, Peace and Security (IUDPAS), National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH)

6 IUDPAS-UNAH "Citizen Perception of Insecurity and Victimization in Honduras" 2018 report

7 <https://www.indexmundi.com/map/?v=69&r=ca&l=es>

8 https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/global_analysis_2019_web.pdf