



The Takeaway

Policy Briefs from the Mosbacher Institute for Trade, Economics, and Public Policy

Addressing Crime as a Root Cause of Migration

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Migration remains a pressing global issue. In 2020, there were over 280 million international migrants worldwide, 86 million in Europe, and 50 million in the United States.¹ The U.S. Customs and Border Protection data show that most encounters occur at the Southwest land border (California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas).² Although migration slowed during the pandemic in 2020, the number of irregular migrants bounced back sharply (Figure 1).

Migrants from El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico made about 45% to 49%, more than half of all encounters annually between 2009-2020, compared to about 28% in 2023. Central American emigration has been a main topic of U.S. policy in the region and was a leading issue in the 2024 presidential election. In 2021, partly due to the influx of irregular migrants, the Biden administration launched a strategy to tackle the root causes of Central American migration with aim of creating better economic opportuni-



WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY?

President Bukele's 2022 crime crackdown led to mass arrests of suspected gang affiliates and significantly reduced homicides, although it raised concerns over human rights violations.

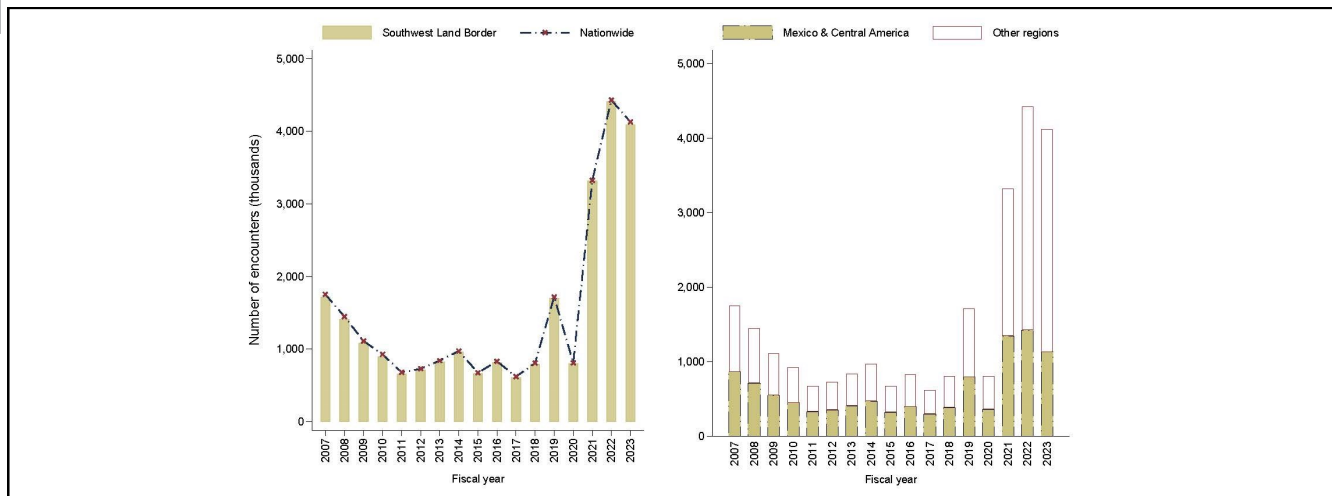
The crackdown reduced Salvadoran encounters at the U.S. border by about 45% to 67% relative to other sending countries.

The crime crackdown should be complemented with strategies addressing economic and social vulnerabilities.

Migration and organized crime are shared challenges and require regional collaboration, including updating the restrictive terms of the U.S. trade agreements with the region.



Figure 1: U.S. Border Encounters, FY 2007-2023



Source: Authors' illustration based on U.S. Customs and Border Protection data. Central America includes El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. A fiscal year spans from October to September.⁸

ties to encourage people to stay in their home countries.³ Most recently, President Donald Trump issued a series of executive actions targeting illegal immigration, mainly through deportations.⁴

Survey responses from AmericasBarometer indicate that seeking better economic opportunities is a root cause of migration.⁵ The responses indicate that migration intentions are significantly higher among respondents who perceive declining income, have recently lost income, have received remittances, are unemployed, or are students. Specifically, the results indicate that those who view the economic situation over the past 12 months as deteriorating (1 percentage point higher) or have faced income loss over the past 2 years (5 percentage points higher) are more inclined to consider migration. These responses are more pronounced among Salvadorans, showing increases of 4 and 5 percentage points compared to other regional respondents.

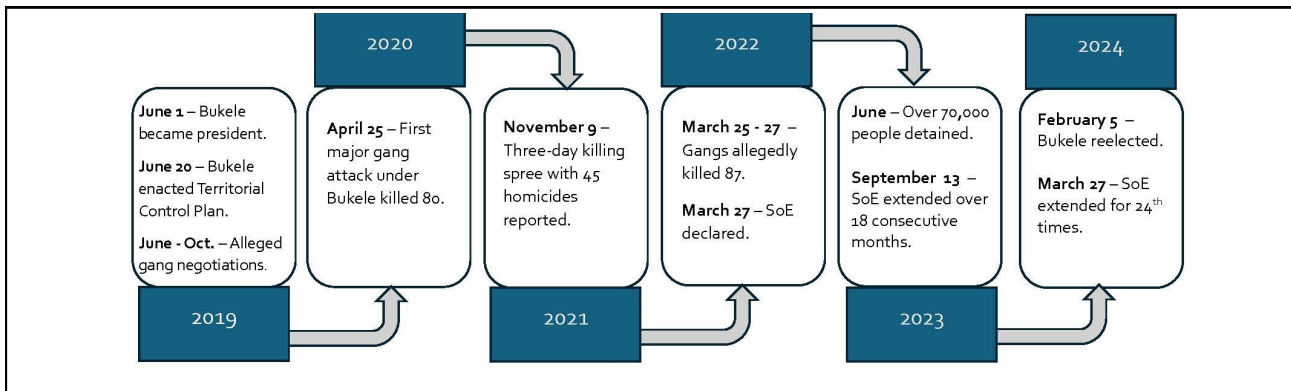
The same survey data also highlights crime and violence-related security concerns as a major driver of migration, compelling individuals to leave their

homes and families for a perilous cross-country journey. Experiencing crime victimization or heightened neighborhood insecurity significantly increases an individual's intention to migrate by 5 and 3 percentage points, respectively. These migration intentions are also more prevalent among young adults aged 16-35, though no significant gender-based differences are observed.

EL SALVADOR'S CRIME CRACKDOWN

El Salvador has grappled with high rates of gang violence, which has destabilized communities and driven migration. In 2019, the current president, Nayib Bukele, won the presidential election (Figure 2). He introduced the Territorial Control Plan, focusing on increasing security forces and prison sanctions.⁶ The plan also introduced social programs targeting vulnerable populations to hinder gang recruitment. Rumors of the Bukele administration negotiating with gang leaders surfaced in return for easing prison sanctions.⁷ In response to a killing spree from March 25-27, 2022, that left 87 dead, the Bukele administration declared the current state of exception (SoE).

Figure 2: Timeline of Events around the State of Exception (SoE) Declaration



Source: Authors' illustration using data from Papadovassilakis et al. (2023) and Flores-Macias (2024).

The state's response to this attack was severe. Security forces arrested most, if not all, of those suspected of being connected to gangs or organized crime. As of January 2024, an estimated 75,163 people had been jailed.⁹ While criticized for alleged major human rights violations, the SoE resulted in a dramatic reduction in the homicide rate, declining from 18 per 100,000 people in 2021 to 2.4 in 2023, one of the lowest levels in recent history.¹⁰ In addition to the sharp decline in homicides, the SoE appears to have improved the business environment, with less than 5% of enterprises reporting crime, theft, and disorder as a major obstacle in 2023, compared to 30% in 2016.¹¹

IMPACT ON U.S. BORDER ENCOUNTERS

Our study shows that the crime crackdown has significantly reduced Salvadoran encounters at the U.S. border relative to others, with effects varying across demographic groups.¹² The reduction in encounters ranged from 46% to 67%. One concern raised was the potential for the crackdown to affect migration through arrests of potential migrants, particularly those with families. Subgroup analyses showed that while there was no significant impact on accompanied minors, there was a moderate effect on single minors (25%) and larger impacts on family units and

single adults (62% and 44%, respectively). These findings indicate that crimes adversely affect families, driving them to migrate to escape dire conditions.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

El Salvador's experience is particularly relevant to other regions facing similar migration challenges, demonstrating the potential for security-focused interventions to reduce migration pressures. Equally important is addressing the concerns over major human rights violations.¹³ Reports show that the crackdown involved arbitrary arrests, overcrowded prisons, and due process violations. A multi-pronged approach is needed that balances security measures with economic and social reforms designed to help communities thrive, thus fostering resilience and reducing the need for migration. This approach should include the following:

- Promote Regional Collaboration:** Collaborating with countries in the region to tackle organized crime and enhancing regional economic integration can reduce irregular migration. For example, **Upgrading Trade Agreements can support domestic employment.** Relaxing the existing restrictive rules of origin clauses could promote exports from the region, economic development, and create jobs for would-be migrants.¹⁴

- **Strengthen Institutions:** Strengthening law enforcement and judicial accountability with transparent mechanisms for addressing human rights violations can enhance public trust.
- **Invest in Social Programs:** Addressing poverty and inequality through education, healthcare, and job creation, along with programs for at-risk youth, can curb gang recruitment.
- **Engage Stakeholders:** Partnering with community organizations, advocacy groups, and other stakeholders ensures policies are inclusive, cooperative, and reflective of local needs.

El Salvador's experience underscores the importance of addressing crime as a root cause of migration. A sustainable solution to migration challenges requires a comprehensive strategy that not only enhances security but also upholds human rights and fosters economic and social development. By implementing these balanced measures, El Salvador and other nations facing similar issues can create safer, more prosperous communities, ultimately reducing the pressures that drive migration.

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Notes:

¹UN DESA. 2021. "International Migrant Stock 2020." <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>

²U.S. Customs and Border Protection: <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/cbp-public-data-portal>

³U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America. <https://cl.usembassy.gov/update-on-the-u-s-strategy-for-addressing-the-root-causes-of-migration-in-central-america-2/>

⁴Presidential Action, The White House: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/>

⁵AmericasBarometer: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/about-americasbarometer.php>

⁶Public Security Policy in El Salvador During the Presidency of Nayib Bukele (2017–2019). Anuario Latinoamericano – Ciencias Políticas y Relaciones Internacionales, 12: 65-85. <https://doi.org/10.17951/al.2021.12.65-85>

⁷Papadovassilakis, A. 2023. "The Road to El Salvador's State of Emergency." InSight Crime. December 6, 2023. <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/road-el-salvador-state-emergency/>

⁸Flores-Macías, Gustavo. 2024. "The Costs of El Salvador's Crime Crackdown." Foreign Affairs. March 20. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/central-america/bukele-costs-salvadors-crime-crackdown>

Papadovassilakis, A., et al. 2023. El Salvador's Perpetual State of Emergency: How Bukele's Government Overpowered Gangs. InSight Crime. <https://insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/El-SalvadorsPerpetual-State-of-Emergency-How-Bukeles-Government-Overpowered-Gangs-InSight-Crime-Dec-2023.pdf>

⁹Flores-Macías, Gustavo. 2024. "The Costs of El Salvador's Crime Crackdown." Foreign Affairs. March 20. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/central-america/bukele-costs-salvadors-crime-crackdown>

¹⁰Based on data from InSight Crime. 2024. InSight Crime's 2023 Homicide Round-Up, and World Bank's World Development Indicators: <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>

¹¹Based on data from the World Bank Enterprise Surveys: <https://www.enterprisesurveys.org/en/enterprisesurveys>

¹²Abreha, K., Johnson, T., & Robertson, R. (2025). Is crime a "root cause" of Central American emigration? Evidence from El Salvador. *Journal of Development Economics*, 174, 103456. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jideveco.2025.103456>

¹³U.S. Department of State. 2023. "2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: El Salvador." <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/el-salvador/>

¹⁴Abreha, K. & R. Robertson, 2023. "Heterogeneous trade agreements and adverse implications of restrictive rules of origin: Evidence from apparel trade" *The World Economy* 46 (12), 3482-3510. <https://doi.org/10.1111/twec.13486>

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