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STRATEGIC

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(U) Misperceptions of U.S. Policy Key Driver in Central American Migrant Surge

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(U) The recent surge of Central American children to the U.S. Southwest border prompted EPIC to examine the probable drivers influencing the rise in Other Than Mexican (OTM) migrants currently overwhelming law enforcement resources.

(U//LES) The El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC) assesses the significant increase in Central American migrants arriving at the border since mid-2013 is most likely driven by traditional migration factors exacerbated by misperceptions of recent U.S. immigration policies among migrants. These misperceptions are likely fueled by human smugglers and Central American media—providing deliberate, errant, or unwitting reporting to migrants on the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) memorandum and comprehensive U.S. immigration reform.

- (U//LES) In late May, the U.S. Border Patrol interviewed unaccompanied children (UAC) and migrant families apprehended in the Rio Grande Valley. Of the 230 total migrants interviewed, 219 cited the primary reason for migrating to the United States was the perception of U.S. immigration laws granting free passes or *permisos*^a to UAC and adult female OTMs traveling with minors. Migrants indicated that knowledge of *permisos* was widespread across Central America due to word of mouth, local, and international media messaging—prompting many to depart for the United States within 30 days of becoming aware of these perceived benefits, according to the same reporting.¹
- (U//LES) U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) also notes that a large number of migrants interviewed claimed family members in the United States encouraged their travel because the U.S. government would cease issuing *permisos* after June 2014. Migrants cited Univision, Primer Impacto, Al Rojo Vivo and several Honduran television news outlets for helping shape their perception of U.S. immigration policy.²

- (U) Although EPIC lacks reliable reporting of Central American newspapers broadcasting the perceived benefits of U.S. immigration policies, several U.S. media outlets since June 2014 have identified Central American newspapers that have enticed minors to travel to the United States. For example, Honduran and El Salvadoran press have reportedly advertised the DACA policy, accommodations for detained UAC, and the promise of reunification with family members in the United States.³

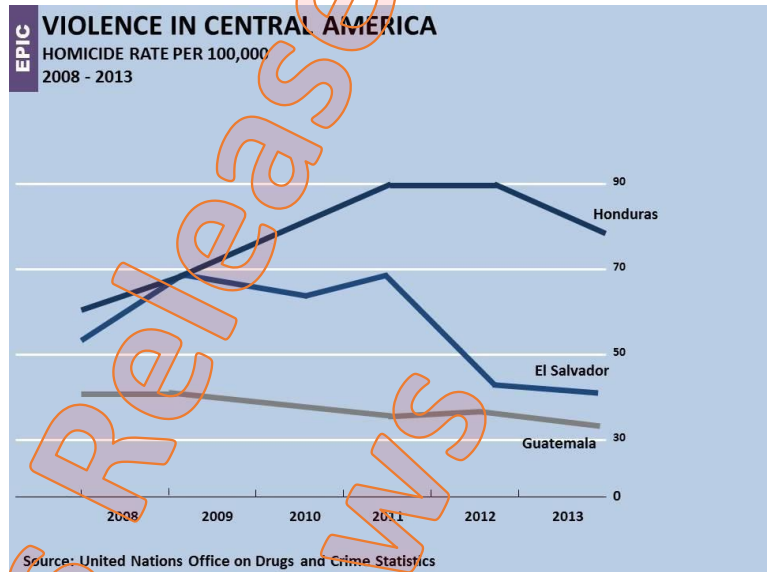
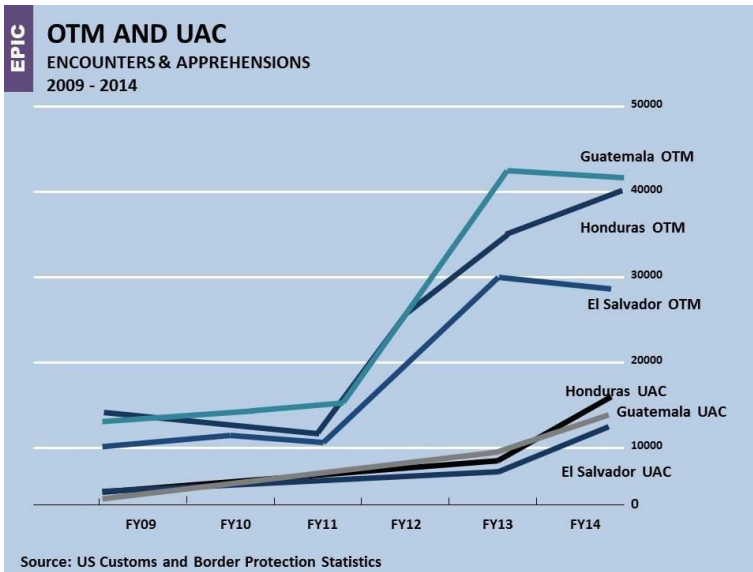
(U) DACA only applies to those meeting the following conditions:

- (U) Under the age of 31 as of June 15, 2012;
- (U) Came to the United States before reaching their 16th birthday;
- (U) Have continuously resided in the United States since June 15, 2007, up to the present time;
- (U) Were physically present in the United States on June 15, 2012;
- (U) Are currently in school, have graduated or obtained a certificate of completion from high school, have obtained a general education development (GED) certificate, or are an honorably discharged veteran of the Coast Guard or Armed Forces of the United States.
- (U) Have not been convicted of a felony, significant misdemeanor, or three or more other misdemeanors, and do not otherwise pose a threat to national security or public safety.

(U) Source: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)

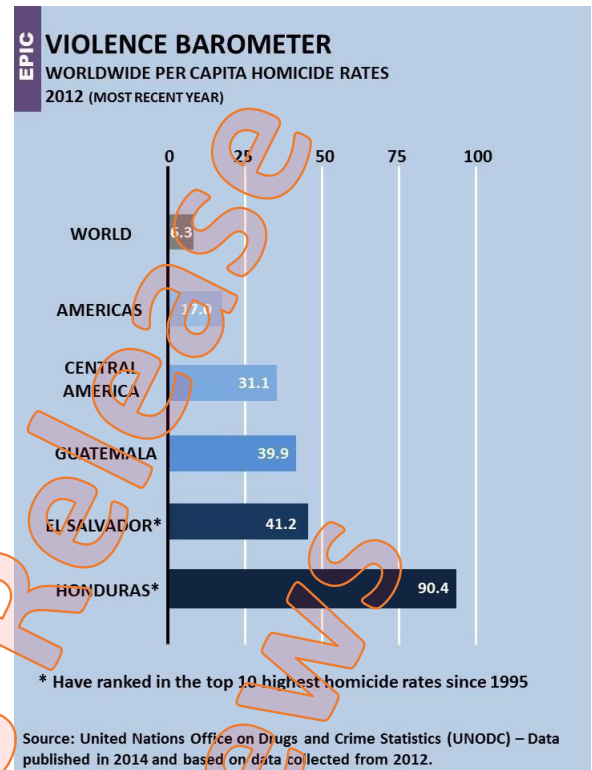
“Permisos” are the Notice to Appear documents issued to undocumented aliens, when they are released on their own recognizance, pending a hearing before a U.S. immigration judge.

(U) Homicide Rates Suggest Violence Compounding the Surge But Likely Not the Primary Factor



(U//LES) EPIC assesses homicide trends and migrant interviews suggest violence is likely not the principal factor driving the increase in UAC migration. While CBP data from early fiscal year 2011 indicates a steady increase in OTM and UAC migration, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) statistics— within this same timeframe— show a decline in per capita homicide rates in these three countries; El Salvador saw the sharpest decline, followed by Honduras and Guatemala, respectively.

- (U//FOUO) El Salvador's decline in homicides from 2011 through 2012 most likely is attributable to a truce between the government and the country's dominant gangs (MS-13 and Calle 18). Criminal activity in Honduras and Guatemala, unlike El Salvador, is not controlled by dominant gangs but by networks of street gangs lacking centralized leadership, making it difficult to target individual gang members, according to a Brookings report.⁴
- (U) The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and a U.S. based international humanitarian agency note that in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador children as young as 10 years of age are targeted to join gangs.⁵ A U.S. based public policy research and advocacy organization concluded that violence in Central America is driven by 900 gangs comprised of roughly 70,000 members.⁷
- (U) UNODC has consistently ranked Honduras,



Guatemala, and El Salvador among the world's most violent countries for the last several decades.^{8 9}

(U) Alien Smugglers Likely Encouraging Misinformation

(U//LES) EPIC judges that alien smuggling organizations and individual smugglers are likely responsible for perpetuating rumors encouraging the Central American migration surge to increase their financial gain. Honduran and Guatemalan immigration officials attribute the UAC surge to alien smugglers, or *coyotes*, preying on mothers and children by motivating them with false U.S. amnesty or asylum rumors, according to Costa Rican press reporting.¹⁰

- (U//LES) U.S. Border Patrol officials report that the majority of migrants interviewed in late May indicated that they made arrangements with smugglers in their respective countries through the assistance of family members and friends in the United States.¹¹
- (U//LES) A majority of migrants interviewed also noted that they had encountered family units, consisting of a mother and child under the age of 18 during their journey to the United States and that the families had indicated they planned to surrender to U.S. authorities because they were informed that they would likely be released.¹²
- (U//LES) According to a body of U.S. and International press reporting, *coyotes* have dispensed misinformation to convince migrants that they have a clear path to U.S. citizenship if they make it into the United States.^{13 14 15 16 17 18}

(U) Traditional Migration Drivers Remain Significant

(U//LES) EPIC assesses that family reunification, rampant gang violence, and poor economic conditions remain traditional migration drivers for Central Americans en route to the United States, based on academic studies and migrant interviews.^{19 20 21 22 23}

- (U//LES) Studies and multiple interviews of migrants conducted by the UNHCR in 2013 and US Border Patrol in 2014, noted hopes of reunification with family present in the United States as a principal reason for UAC migration.²⁴
- (U) In May 2013, UNHCR conducted interviews on 302 unaccompanied minors from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Of the aggregate, 43% indicated violence from gangs or organized crime as a factor for leaving their home country; 22% indicated abuse at home as a factor; while 44% did not cite fear of serious harm as a deciding factor for leaving. Individual country results, however, do indicate societal violence is a predominate factor affecting UAC from El Salvador.²⁵
- (U//LES) U.S. Border Patrol Officials in Rio Grande Valley Sector interviewed 195 Central American migrants in February 2014; responses indicated that economic conditions, such as inability to secure employment and insufficient wages, were significant migration drivers to the United States.²⁶

(U) Outlook: Near-Term Migration Slowdown Unlikely

(U//FOUO) EPIC assesses that UAC flow to the border will remain elevated until migrants' misperceptions about US immigration benefits are changed. We further judge that this process could take the remainder of 2014 given the time needed for bi-lateral coordination efforts—such as information and enforcement campaigns in Mexico and Central America—to take hold. Nonetheless, traditional underlying immigration factors, such as family reunification and poor socioeconomic conditions, will continue to drive alien flow—including minors—from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

(U) Intelligence Gaps

- (U) EPIC lacks robust law enforcement reporting on alien smuggling networks, drug trafficking organizations, and transnational criminal organizations involvement in UAC and accompanied minor smuggling operations.
- (U) EPIC lacks detailed insights into factors contributing to the sudden and significant decline in adult OTM apprehensions for Guatemalan and El Salvadoran migrants in mid-2013 and the continued increase in Honduran OTM and UAC numbers.
- (U) EPIC lacks detailed reporting on the extent Central American media outlets have reportedly misrepresented U.S. immigration policies, contributing to the UAC surge.

(U) Contact Information

(U) This product was prepared by the Criminal Threats Unit, Strategic Analysis Section, El Paso Intelligence Center. Questions or comments may be directed to the Unit Chief [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

(U) Approved By

//signed//

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(U) Endnotes



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