



Is the U.S. the Best Place for Central American Migrants and Refugees?

August 2018, By Matthew Tragesser

Each year, hundreds of thousands¹ of Central American migrants seek better opportunities in the United States with the hope of evading violence, instability, and economic deprivation in their countries.² Yet, as more and more Central American migrants stream toward the U.S. border, there's a key question that has been discussed for years, but remains unresolved: Is the United States truly the best place for Central American migrants and refugees?

While the United States remains the most desired destination for immigrants across the world, it is impossible to accept every immigrant who applies for legal residency.³ In order to preserve the interests of its own citizens, the U.S. needs to select those who are likely to assimilate and contribute positively to society while limiting immigration to manage population growth in order to reduce demands on limited natural resources.⁴

With hundreds of thousands of individuals fleeing poverty stricken and unstable countries like Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, and headed for the United States mainly as economic migrants, American leaders should be asking whether other regional powers should be stepping up and taking in more migrants.⁵

Mexico, Costa Rica, and Panama could all serve as viable options for Central Americans who desire to relocate. In an economic, social, and political sense, these nations can often offer something to Central American migrants that the United States can't: Spanish-speaking economies that require labor at the skill-levels most Central Americans possess.

What Does the Data Say?

Mexico, Costa Rica and Panama would all offer fleeing Central Americans improved lifestyles. As seen by the table below, these three nations (green) rank significantly higher than Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (red) in five rankings measuring the quality of life of countries around the world:

Country	HDI Index Rank ⁶	Life Expectancy Rank ⁷	U.N. Education Index Rank ⁸	GDP Per Capital Rank ⁹	Social Progress Index Rank ¹⁰
Mexico	77	90	71	91	48
Panama	60	55	65	83	40
Costa Rica	66	58	68	103	28
USA	10	43	5	20	18
Guatemala	125	147	125	152	84
Honduras	130	151	129	170	89
El Salvador	117	115	115	146	70

Mexico, Costa Rica, and Panama, enjoy a life expectancy ranking that is, on average, 70 points higher than their southern neighbors. GDP per capita, an index that measures a country's economic activity and is a good indicator of standard of living, came close with a 64 spot average ranking improvement,¹¹ while HDI, an index that measures social and economic development in countries, had an average ranking improvement of about 56 points.¹² The U.N. Education Index, an index that measures the average years of schooling and expected years of schooling, had a 55 average ranking improvement over the Northern Triangle countries,¹³ and the Social Progress Index, an index that focuses on well-being, opportunities, and basic human needs, followed with a 42-point average improvement.¹⁴

While the United States undisputedly remains the best country to live in based on these five categories of rankings, it's important to note that Mexico, Costa Rica, and Panama still offer significant improvements and if migrants are truly being persecuted, seeking improved conditions that allow the safe pursuit of everyday activities should be the main desire.

What Other Advantages Can These Countries Bring?

In addition to improved quality of life, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Panama also offer three distinct advantages over the United States. First, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Panama all list Spanish as their official national language, which would certainly help individuals avoid language barriers and transition more easily into their new country. Next, being in a Hispanic dominated population also allows for easier assimilation to occur as culture, religion, and customs are more aligned. Lastly, immigrating to either Mexico, Panama, or Costa Rica can save more money and reduce the travel distance for migrants. Take for example a Honduran seeking to relocate in Costa Rica versus the United States. The journey from Tegucigalpa, Honduras to the border of Costa Rica could be completed in a mere 310 miles instead of the 1,600 miles required to reach Brownsville, Texas, one of the southernmost points of the U.S. Border. The shorter journey also minimizes opportunities for migrants to be robbed, exploited, or even killed.

Why Won't This Migration Crisis End Anytime Soon?

Significant challenges remain in reducing illegal migration to the United States. Migrants from Central America continue to seek improved economic opportunities in the U.S. due to the country's exceptional exchange rate. This advantage enables migrants to send remittances back to their homes that can support a family on a wage that is near the poverty line in the United States. The U.S.'s lax immigration enforcement, ranging from not investigating overstayed visas¹⁵ to providing state-issued driver's licenses to illegal aliens, also incentivize aliens to come into the country illegally.¹⁶ Many of the country's immigration problems today reflect poor and weak policies developed by our own government.

Aside from our own country's policies, many governments in Latin America have overtly promoted illegal immigration as a means of stabilizing their economies through remittances¹⁷; and, in some cases, as a political safety valve. The vast majority of the states to our south have deliberately remained ineffective in halting illegal immigration, so as not to provoke the ire of their neighbors.¹⁸

In recent months, Mexico has been more proactive¹⁹ in prohibiting illegal aliens from reaching the U.S, but, in the past, it has actively advocated for illegal immigration, as seen by the Mexican government's production of instructional guides on how to cross the U.S. border undetected.²⁰ If the United States wishes to decrease its illegal immigration levels, it must put diplomatic and economic pressure on Mexico, and other governments in the region.²¹

Though both faulty U.S. immigration policies and inept foreign governments are factors that contribute to the influx of illegal immigration from the South, the solution to Central America's political problems lies with the very people who are fleeing the region. Individuals, especially from the Northern Triangle, must begin taking the steps necessary to restore peace and stability in their countries. As noted by Matt O'Brien, director of research at FAIR, "Honduras has a current population of about 9 million people, but about 500,000 Honduras live in the U.S. and many thousand live abroad in other nations. Had these individuals remained in their country rather than fleeing, their voice and voting power may have helped avoid the constitutional crisis of 2009 and even altered the 2017 Honduran presidential election."²²

This concept of political activism and engagement may seem easier said than done, but it is not unprecedented. After the 2010 revolution in Tunisia, its government implemented a new constitution and turned its elections into a more democratic process.²³ Similar to Tunisia, Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004 led to positive institutional reforms as citizens grouped together to fight off corruption and voter intimidation.²⁴ By protesting and sticking with their country during times of adversity, Tunisians and Ukrainians witnessed positive institutional political change. If countries like these have the ability to change the course of its country and identity, Central American countries can follow similar paths. Ultimately, migrating to the United States, Mexico, and other more stable Central American countries will offer temporary solutions, but cannot be seen as sustainable nor long-term solutions.

Conclusion

In summary, Central Americans can still find vastly improved lifestyles simply by migrating to either Mexico, Panama, or Costa Rica. In fact, when it comes to retirement, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Panama continuously rank as the most preferred international destinations for U.S. citizens, highlighting the many advantages these countries can offer to individuals seeking reasonable costs of living and good quality of life.²⁵ Furthermore, the assimilation process in these countries would be less harsh as the language and cultures are similar to those found in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. In addition, the United States must also begin sending a clear message to migrants that it will not automatically accept every individual fleeing generalized conditions of civil strife or seeking improved economic opportunities.

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- ¹² Investopedia, "Human Development Index," 2018, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/p/per-capita-gdp.asp>
- ¹³ Ibid, 8
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 10
- ¹⁵ Stephen Dinan, "99 Percent of Illegal Immigrants Who Overstay Visas Aren't Investigated," The Washington Times, January 20, 2016, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/jan/20/illegal-immigrants-who-overstay-visas-rarely-inves/>
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