



February 2015

CENTRAL AMERICA

Information on Migration of Unaccompanied Children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras

Accessible Version

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-362](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Since 2012, there has been a rapid increase in the number of UAC apprehended at the U.S.-Mexican border. According to DHS's Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the number of UAC from any country apprehended at the U.S.-Mexican border climbed from more than 24,000 in fiscal year 2012 to nearly 39,000 in fiscal year 2013, and to nearly 69,000 in fiscal year 2014. Prior to fiscal year 2012, the majority of UAC apprehended at the border were Mexican nationals. However, more than half of the UAC apprehended at the border in fiscal year 2013, and 75 percent apprehended in fiscal year 2014 were nationals of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, according to DHS/CBP. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras face various socio-economic challenges, which the United States is seeking to address through assistance efforts.

GAO was asked to review issues related to U.S. assistance to Central America addressing the rapid increase in migration of UAC from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to the United States. This report identifies U.S. mission-level efforts to (1) identify causes of the rapid increase in migration of unaccompanied children and (2) address the causes identified.

GAO developed a set of questions to obtain written responses from State, USAID, and DHS officials responsible for programs in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. GAO reviewed, analyzed, and tabulated these agency officials' responses.

View [GAO-15-362](#). For more information, contact David Gootnick at (202) 512-3149 or gootnickd@gao.gov

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What GAO Found

Department of State (State), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials stationed in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras most commonly identified crime and violence and economic concerns as causes primarily responsible for the recent rapid increase in migration to the United States by unaccompanied alien children (UAC). These causes were followed by educational concerns, the desire for family reunification, and the role of smuggling networks, among others. Agency officials' responses to a GAO set of questions showed little variance in attributing causes of UAC migration by country. The officials reported drawing on various sources of information to identify these causes, including conducting first-hand interviews with migrants and their families; meeting with host government and non-governmental agencies; and analyzing various data, reports, and other information sources. For example, the State and USAID officials' responses for Honduras noted that the agencies had identified causes through a combination of surveys, discussions with government agencies and civil society organizations, anecdotal reports, and others.

The officials reported that agencies had developed new programs and modified existing programs to address the rapid increase in UAC migration in each of the three countries. They noted that most of these programs are specifically targeted to address identified causes of migration, such as crime and violence, lack of economic opportunities, and criminal networks that smuggle unaccompanied children. For example, DHS officials reported that the department had implemented Operation Coyote, an initiative active in all three countries to combat criminal organizations involved in UAC smuggling. According to agency officials, new and modified programs ranged in location from specific communities or cities to border areas to nation-wide or region-wide initiatives. State and USAID officials also noted that some of their efforts and strategic objectives that had been in place prior to the rapid increase in UAC migration focused on related issues such as economic development and crime reduction. Officials reported that they have undertaken various efforts to plan their responses to the increase in migration, including coordinating among U.S. agencies and with host governments. For example, agency officials from all three countries reported participating in UAC interagency working groups at each embassy. In addition, State and USAID officials said they have used DHS data on the location of origins of UAC to inform their efforts.

Contents

Letter	1
Background	2
Agency Officials Most Commonly Identified Violence and Economic Concerns among the Causes of Unaccompanied Child Migration to the United States	4
Agency Officials Report Developing New Programs and Activities and Modifying Existing Ones to Respond to the Rapid Increase in Unaccompanied Child Migration	9
Agency Comments and Our Evaluation	15
Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology	18
Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments	20
GAO Contact:	20
Staff Acknowledgments:	20
Tables	
Table 1: Examples of Three Agencies' New Programs and Activities in Response to the Increase in Unaccompanied Alien Child (UAC) Migration	10
Table 2: Examples of Three Agencies' Programs and Activities Modified in Response to the Increase in Unaccompanied Alien Child (UAC) Migration	11

Abbreviations

CARSI	Central America Regional Security Initiative
CBP	Customs and Border Protection
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
UAC	unaccompanied alien children
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

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Letter

February 27, 2015

Congressional Requesters:

Since 2012, there has been a rapid increase in the number of unaccompanied alien children (UAC) apprehended at the U.S.-Mexican border.¹ According to the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the number of UAC from any country apprehended at the U.S.-Mexican border climbed from more than 24,000 in fiscal year 2012 to nearly 39,000 in fiscal year 2013, and to nearly 69,000 in fiscal year 2014. Prior to fiscal year 2012, the majority of UAC apprehended at the border were Mexican nationals. However, more than half of the UAC apprehended at the border in fiscal year 2013, and about 75 percent (nearly 51,000) of UAC apprehended in fiscal year 2014, were nationals of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, according to DHS/CBP.

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras face various socioeconomic challenges, which the United States is seeking to address through assistance efforts. In fiscal year 2014, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and State Department (State) bilateral assistance was about \$22 million to El Salvador, \$60 million to Guatemala, and \$42 million to Honduras. The U.S. government also provides additional assistance through regional programs, such as the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). In addition, the Millennium Challenge Corporation has a \$277 million compact with El Salvador and a \$15.7 million threshold program with Honduras.²

We were asked to review issues related to U.S. assistance to Central America addressing the rapid increase in migration of UAC from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to the United States. This report

¹U.S. law defines an unaccompanied alien child, or UAC, as "a child who has no lawful immigration status in the United States; has not attained 18 years of age; and with respect to whom there is no parent or legal guardian in the United States or no parent or legal guardian in the United States available to provide care and physical custody." 6 U.S.C. § 279(g)(2).

²A compact is a multiyear agreement between the Millennium Challenge Corporation and an eligible country to fund specific programs targeted at reducing poverty and stimulating economic growth. The corporation's threshold program is designed to assist countries that have not yet qualified for compact assistance but have demonstrated a significant commitment to improving their performance on the corporation's eligibility criteria.

identifies U.S. mission-level efforts to (1) identify causes of the rapid increase in migration of unaccompanied children and (2) address the causes identified. We will be issuing a separate report at a later date that examines agencies' assistance targeting and performance evaluation.

To address the objectives for this review, we developed a set of questions to obtain written responses from State, USAID, and DHS officials responsible for programs in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.³ Specifically, we obtained responses reflecting the perspectives of the three ambassadors, regarding State efforts; the three mission directors, regarding USAID efforts; and the three country attachés, regarding DHS efforts. We reviewed, analyzed, and tabulated all agency responses.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2014 to February 2015 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—the countries with the greatest increase in migrating UAC—face numerous socioeconomic challenges. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, these countries were among the top five countries with the highest homicide rates worldwide in 2012. In addition, according to 2011 World Bank data, more than 60 percent of Hondurans, more than 50 percent of Guatemalans, and 30 percent of Salvadorans live below the poverty level. Moreover, government officials from the three countries noted in their 2014 regional plan that income inequality presents a major challenge, as 20 percent of the wealthiest segments of the population account for more

³We also contacted the Millennium Challenge Corporation about its programs in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Millennium Challenge Corporation officials' noted that the corporation's recently signed compact with El Salvador and proposed threshold program with Guatemala may address some causes of migration such as lack of economic and educational opportunities. However, these officials noted that it is not within the corporation's mandate to directly address migration issues and that the corporation has not modified its compact program to address the recent rapid increase in unaccompanied child migration. Therefore, we did not include Millennium Challenge Corporation efforts in the body of this report.

than half of overall income.⁴ These officials also identified a limited supply and quality of services in housing, early childhood health care, nutrition, and child development as among the main challenges to development, while also noting that weaknesses in the countries' educational systems have resulted in workforces with less schooling and more limited skills as compared with those of other countries in the region. Finally, all three countries rank below the regional average on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index.⁵

In fiscal years 2013 and 2014, combined, State and USAID bilateral assistance was about \$49 million for El Salvador, more than \$141 million for Guatemala, and more than \$93 million for Honduras. The U.S. government also provides additional assistance through regional programs, such as CARSII. CARSII funds activities to improve law enforcement capabilities, prevent crime and violence, and deter and detect border criminal activity, among other efforts, in Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. Between fiscal years 2008 and 2014, U.S. agencies allocated more than \$800 million for CARSII activities from various accounts. We previously reported that, through June 2013, more than 50 percent of funds allocated for CARSII activities had been designated for activities in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.⁶ In addition, the Millennium Challenge Corporation signed a \$277 million compact with El Salvador in September 2014, with projects aimed at investing in El Salvador's regulatory systems to enhance investment opportunities, in human capital to improve the quality of education, and in physical capital to reduce transportation and logistics costs. The corporation also has a \$15.7 million threshold program with Honduras, with projects to increase the efficiency and transparency of public financial management and public-private partnerships.

⁴*Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle: A Road Map*. Regional Plan Prepared by El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. September 2014.

⁵The Corruption Perception Index ranks countries around the world according to the degree of corruption that is perceived to exist among public officials and politicians on an annual basis. A lower ranking means a higher degree of corruption is perceived to exist.

⁶GAO, *Central America: U.S. Agencies Considered Various Factors in Funding Security Activities, but Need to Assess Progress in Achieving Interagency Objectives*, [GAO-13-771](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 25, 2013).

The administration has taken recent action related to these three countries. On November 14, 2014, the administration announced an in-country refugee/parole program in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, which has since begun. The program is intended to allow certain parents who are lawfully present in the United States to request access to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program for their children still living in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Agency Officials Most Commonly Identified Violence and Economic Concerns among the Causes of Unaccompanied Child Migration to the United States

State, USAID, and DHS officials stationed in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras most commonly identified crime and violence and economic concerns as causes primarily responsible for the rapid increase in UAC migration to the United States, followed by educational concerns, the desire for family reunification, and the role of smuggling networks. Family dysfunction and migrants' perceptions of U.S. immigration policy were among other causes the agency officials identified. A State official noted that individual migrants are likely to be driven to migrate by a mixture of these causes. The responses showed little variance in attributing the causes of migration by country. Agency officials reported drawing on various sources of information to identify these causes, ranging from conducting first-hand interviews to analyzing various statistical data.

- *Crime and violence:* All nine of the State, USAID, and DHS officials' responses identified crime and violence as a cause. Agency officials' responses noted that gangs, drug trafficking, and criminal organizations contributed to the crime and violence. For example, the State official's response for Honduras noted that gang activities, such as extortion and forced conscription, affect Hondurans of all economic levels. The USAID officials' responses for El Salvador and Guatemala characterized crime and violence as growing concerns. The USAID officials' responses also noted that El Salvador's national and local governments' inability to respond to violence and gang activity, and Guatemala's generally weak rule of law, contributed to the effects of violence on the population. In addition, the USAID official's response for El Salvador noted gang violence limits foreign direct investment, limiting economic opportunities and exacerbating poverty.
- *Economic concerns:* All State, USAID, and DHS officials' responses identified economic concerns, including lack of economic opportunity and high poverty levels, as a cause. Both the State official's response for Honduras and the USAID official's response for Guatemala noted that economic opportunities for many farmers in both countries have been increasingly threatened or eliminated because of the recent

spread of the coffee rust fungus, which has increased in the past 2 years and has hurt coffee production.⁷ Specifically, the USAID official's response reported that the fungus has affected 70 percent of Guatemala's coffee crop and resulted in the loss of 100,000 jobs and a reduction in coffee output of 15 percent. The State official's response for Honduras also noted that high income disparity and unemployment affect urban areas as well.

- *Educational concerns:* Eight of nine State, USAID, and DHS officials' responses identified educational concerns, including low quality of or limited access to education, as a cause. Most agency officials' responses identified economic and educational concerns as interconnected causes of migration. For example, USAID officials' responses noted that in El Salvador the poorly performing educational system fails to provide the necessary skills for children to obtain jobs, leading to increased migration, while in Honduras, youth who work or go to school generally are less likely to consider migrating.
- *Family reunification:* Eight of nine State, USAID, and DHS officials' responses identified the desire to reunify with family as a cause. The State official's response for Guatemala noted that unaccompanied child migrants may seek to reunify with a parent or family member in the United States, while the State official's response for Honduras noted the desire for reunification and the belief that minors would be allowed to remain in the United States indefinitely increased the migration of unaccompanied children.
- *Role of smuggling organizations:* Eight of nine State, USAID, and DHS officials' responses identified the role of smuggling networks as a cause. Agency officials responded that human smugglers have increasingly influenced the rate of migration through more aggressive and misleading marketing approaches. For example, the State official's response for El Salvador noted that smugglers increased migration demand this past summer by providing false or misleading information on the ease of migration. The State official's response for Guatemala noted these same tactics by smugglers, along with rising crime and an improving U.S economy, likely drove this summer's increase of UAC migrants from Guatemala. The State official's response for Honduras noted that smugglers increased their recruiting

⁷Coffee is a leading export in Guatemala and Honduras.

of child migrants in the spring of 2014, taking advantage of Hondurans' desire to reunite with family members in the United States, as well as Hondurans' perceptions that changes in U.S. immigration law would ease paths to citizenship for Hondurans in the United States. USAID and DHS officials' responses for El Salvador described increasing efforts by smugglers to employ savvy marketing tactics in appealing to youth and their families.

- *Domestic dysfunction or abuse:* Family dysfunction, breakdowns in family structures, or domestic abuse was identified as a cause in six agency officials' responses across all three countries. The State official's response for Honduras noted that a large percentage of children do not live with their parents, that grandmothers often care for numerous grandchildren, and that domestic violence and sexual abuse are widespread. The USAID official's response for El Salvador reported a similar dynamic, with children left in the care of non-parents, creating instability or uncertainty for youth who turn to crime, drugs, or migration. The USAID official's response for Honduras noted that such circumstances fuel children's and parent's desire to reunify in the United States.
- *Perceptions of U.S. immigration policy:* Five agency officials' responses across all three countries identified migrants' perceptions of U.S. immigration policies as a primary cause of UAC migration. For example, the State official's response for Honduras reported that some Hondurans believed that comprehensive immigration reform in the United States would lead to a path to citizenship for anyone living in the United States at the time of reform. The USAID official's response for Honduras reported that some Hondurans believe that unaccompanied children would be reunited with their families and allowed to stay in the United States. Also, as noted above, the State officials' responses for El Salvador and Guatemala noted smugglers spread misinformation about U.S. immigration policies, creating misperceptions among migrants.
- *Effects of prior Honduran migration:* The USAID and DHS officials' responses for Honduras identified the effects of the global economic crisis compounded by the Honduran political crisis in 2009 and 2010 as a cause of UAC migration. The USAID official's response noted that because of the combined crises large numbers of Hondurans immigrated to the United States and that these migrants now have the means to send for the children they left in Honduras.

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- *Mistrust of national police:* The USAID and DHS officials' responses for Honduras identified mistrust of the national police as a cause. The USAID official's response noted that this lack of trust exacerbates the hopelessness many feel regarding violence in their neighborhoods, leading to increased migration.
 - *Lack of youth services:* The USAID and DHS officials' responses for Honduras also identified the lack of organizations committed to counseling youth against migration as a cause.

Agency Officials Reported Little Variance in Causes of Migration by Country

Agency officials' responses showed little variance in causes of migration by country, though, as noted above, three causes were identified only by agency officials responding from Honduras.

- *El Salvador:* Agency officials did not identify one cause as most responsible for the rapid increase in migration in El Salvador. The State official's response noted the causes are multiple and vary among individuals, but that violence, economic and educational concerns, and the desire for family reunification are the primary drivers. The USAID official's response identified growing violence and crime, including violence and crime due to gang activity, as a primary cause, and noted that gang violence negatively affected economic growth and exacerbated poverty.
- *Guatemala:* USAID officials identified the lack of economic opportunity, in particular, as the leading cause of UAC migration in Guatemala. The State official's response noted that the Western Highlands of Guatemala and areas around Guatemala City were the main areas of child migration concern, because of poverty in the former, and crime and violence in the latter. Furthermore, the USAID official's response noted poverty in the Western Highlands is also affected by factors other than economic issues, including lack of adequate health services, insufficient access to secondary education and vocational training, and weak governance structures that do not allow for adequate citizen participation. In addition, this response noted that violence caused by organized crime and gangs drove the migration of youth in urban areas such as Guatemala City, while domestic violence was a more prevalent factor in driving youth migration in the Western Highlands. The USAID official's response stated that in certain areas the majority of child migrants are from the middle-class, as the extremely poor cannot afford smugglers' fees.

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- *Honduras:* The DHS official's response stated that violence is the main factor affecting UAC migration. The State and USAID officials' responses reported that most communities from which child migrants come are in low-income, high-violence urban areas, and that economic concerns are likely a greater cause of migration in rural areas. The State official's response also stated it is believed that smugglers focused their marketing activities on the northern part of the country. Three causes—effects of the prior Honduran migration, mistrust of the national police, and lack of youth services—were identified by agency officials' responses only for Honduras.

Agency Officials Used a Variety of Sources to Identify Causes of Migration

Agency officials' responses indicated they identified these causes of migration by synthesizing various sources of information, ranging from first-hand discussions with deportees or youth considered to be potential migrants to analyses of literature and statistical data. One or more agency officials' responses reported using the following information sources to identify causes of the rapid increase in migration of unaccompanied children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to the United States:

- discussions with deportees, including unaccompanied children, and with migrants' family members;
- USAID-sponsored focus groups composed of youth and community leaders, conducted at various locations in all three countries;
- meetings with host country government officials, civil society organizations, and other stakeholder entities involved in child migration issues;
- intelligence on criminal networks' smuggling efforts;
- homicide data;
- surveys;
- DHS and USAID data on origins of unaccompanied children;
- agency and implementing partner assessments of various sectors and target communities; and
- studies published by various organizations including the United Nations, universities, and USAID contractors.

Officials from all three agencies reported that they had used at least two of the above information sources for corroboration in identifying causes of migration. For example:

- The State official's response for Honduras reported that State identified causes through a combination of surveys, discussions with government agencies and civil society organizations, anecdotal reports, and other sources.
- The USAID official's response for El Salvador reported that USAID corroborated findings resulting from focus group discussions through discussions with host government officials and other stakeholders such as religious leaders. The USAID official's response for El Salvador also noted the focus groups included participants from locations that had been included in a DHS-produced map of the locations of origin of unaccompanied child migrants.
- The DHS official's response for Guatemala reported that DHS identified causes through discussions with government officials, stakeholders, and deported children while also reviewing a number of reports and studies to help shape the assessment.

Agency Officials Report Developing New Programs and Activities and Modifying Existing Ones to Respond to the Rapid Increase in Unaccompanied Child Migration

State, USAID, and DHS officials in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras reported that they had both developed new programs and modified or shifted the priorities of existing programs to address the rapid increase in UAC migration from each of the three countries. Most State and USAID officials' responses noted that the agencies drew on existing funds, such as by shifting mission resources, in developing or modifying these programs. According to the officials, these programs ranged in location from specific communities or cities to border areas to nationwide or regionwide initiatives.

New Programs and Activities

State, USAID, and DHS officials reported identifying or developing new programs or activities in all three countries. Agency officials reported that most but not all of these programs are specifically targeted to address causes of the rapid increase in UAC migration, such as crime and violence, lack of economic opportunities, and criminal networks that

smuggle unaccompanied children. Some of these programs are still being planned. See table 1 for examples of these programs.⁸

Table 1: Examples of Three Agencies’ New Programs and Activities in Response to the Increase in Unaccompanied Alien Child (UAC) Migration

Agency and country	Program description	Program location	Agency-identified cause of migration addressed by program	Funding, as reported by agency
State				
El Salvador	Improved border inspection program	Along Salvadoran border, particularly blind spots between six primary immigration checkpoints	Agency did not specifically link program to identified cause of migration	\$500,000
Guatemala	Public outreach radio campaign	Western Highlands	Misinformation concerning U.S. immigration policy	\$10,000
Honduras	Training program for prosecutors and judges	Countrywide	Smuggling networks	\$25,000
USAID				
El Salvador	Provide rehabilitation services to youth in conflict with the law	To be determined—three of the largest UAC communities of origin	Crime and violence	\$1.9 million (estimate)
Guatemala	Introduction of coffee rust-resistant seedlings to Western Highlands communities	Western Highlands	Poverty and lack of economic opportunity, specifically addressing spread of coffee rust fungus	Not specified
El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras	Reception and repatriation assistance	Returnee in-processing facilities	Lack of youth services	\$7.6 million for the three countries
DHS				
El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras	Operation Coyote, targeting criminal organizations involved in child smuggling	El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama	Smuggling networks	Not specified
El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras ^a	Dangers of the Journey Campaign to discourage illegal migration of unaccompanied minors	El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras	Smugglers and misperceptions concerning U.S. immigration policy.	Not specified

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)-, State-, and Department of Homeland Security (DHS)-reported data. | GAO-15-362

^aDHS provided this program example in its comments on a draft of this report.

⁸We selected the programs included in table 1 from a larger list for purposes of illustrating different types of new programs that address different causes, which agency officials reported.

Modified Programs and Activities

State, USAID, and DHS officials also reported modifying programs or activities in all three countries. As with the new programs discussed above, the agency officials reported that most but not all of these modified programs are intended to address causes of the rapid increase in UAC migration, such as crime and violence, lack of educational opportunities, and misinformation spread by child smuggling networks on migration. See table 2 for examples of these programs.⁹

Table 2: Examples of Three Agencies’ Programs and Activities Modified in Response to the Increase in Unaccompanied Alien Child (UAC) Migration

Agency and country	Program description	Program location	Causes of migration addressed by program	Funding, as reported by agency
State				
El Salvador	Partial funding for Salvadoran government campaign against undocumented immigration and the dangers of the journey north	Countrywide	Misinformation by human smugglers	\$140,000
Guatemala	Municipal policing project	Western Highlands, border region	Crime and violence	\$2.2 million; can draw on other funding if needed
Honduras	Vetted units and task forces to intercept child migrants and smugglers	All along Honduran border with El Salvador and Guatemala	Smuggling networks	\$600,000
USAID				
El Salvador	Improve school infrastructure and educational resources	51 municipalities including those with high numbers of UAC	Crime and violence	\$6.1 million
Guatemala	Crime prevention programming	Active in high-crime municipalities; would be expanded to Western Highlands communities with rising violence levels	Crime and violence	Not specified
Honduras	Improving education for work and learning (program extension)	San Pedro Sula, Tegucigalpa, La Ceiba (three of the largest cities in Honduras)	Lack of educational opportunities	\$3 million
DHS				

⁹We selected the programs included in table 2 from a larger list for purposes of illustrating different types of modified programs that address different causes, which agency officials reported.

Agency and country	Program description	Program location	Causes of migration addressed by program	Funding, as reported by agency
El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras	Transnational criminal investigative units targeted to address smuggling	El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama	Smuggling networks	Not specified
El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras ^a	Dangers of the Journey Campaign to discourage illegal migration of unaccompanied minors	El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras	Smugglers and misperceptions concerning U.S. immigration policy.	Not specified

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)-, State-, and Department of Homeland Security (DHS)-reported data. | GAO-15-362

^aDHS provided this program example in its comments on a draft of this report.

State officials in all three countries also reported diplomatic outreach efforts conducted in response to the rapid increase in UAC migration. For example, the State official’s response for El Salvador noted that State, USAID, and DHS officials periodically meet with host government officials to coordinate messaging intended to warn Salvadorans about the dangers of the journey to the United States, among other issues. The State official’s response for Guatemala noted that high-level visits have played an important role in raising the profile of the UAC issue with the host government. The State official’s response for Honduras noted that the embassy modified its diplomatic engagement to focus on this issue and that addressing the UAC issue became the embassy’s highest priority in June, July, and August 2014. The response also noted embassy staff met with the highest levels of the Honduran government on at least a weekly basis to focus on this issue and supported weekly visits from congressional delegations and executive branch officials. In addition, in commenting on a draft of this report, State noted that several high-level meetings and trips to the region involving the U.S. President, Vice President, Secretary of State, and other State officials, as well as Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran government officials, demonstrated that the issue was a priority.

Pre-existing Programs and Activities

Although State and USAID officials reported developing and modifying programs in response to the rapid increase in UAC migration, these agency officials also noted that their pre-existing efforts and strategic objectives, which had been in place prior to the rapid increase in migration, addressed related issues.

- USAID officials’ responses for all three countries noted that the agency’s pre-existing programs or strategic objectives focus on causes of the rapid increase in child migration, particularly reducing violence and increasing educational opportunities and economic growth. For example, the USAID official’s response for El Salvador

noted its recently approved country development cooperation strategy focuses on many issues directly related to the rapid increase in child migration to the United States, with development objectives focusing on reducing violence and economic growth. The USAID official's response for Guatemala also noted that the development objectives of its country development cooperation strategy focus on economic growth and improving social development in the Western Highlands and on increasing security and justice in Guatemala with an emphasis on municipalities that experience high levels of violent crime. For example, in Guatemala, USAID is working to provide alternative basic education opportunities for out-of-school youth in the Western Highlands, and to improve education quality by supporting the Ministry of Education in several areas such as teacher training. Similarly, the USAID official's response for Honduras noted that its principal objectives in its recently approved country development strategy are improving citizen security and reducing extreme poverty.

- The State official's response for El Salvador noted that the department's Partnership for Growth bilateral initiative has, since 2011, sought to address, among other issues, crime and the need for improved education, which State identified as causes of child migration. Similarly, the State official's response for Guatemala noted that the post already had in place programs addressing causes of migration such as violence and poverty. Specifically, the State official's response outlined a number of post efforts intended to increase economic activity in Guatemala, such as by encouraging U.S. businesses to invest in Guatemala and providing assistance to Guatemalan entrepreneurs. In addition, the State official's response outlined post activities to strengthen police and judicial sector entities, which are aimed at reducing violence.

Planning Efforts

State, USAID, and DHS officials reported that they have undertaken various efforts to plan their responses to the increase in migration, including coordinating among U.S. agencies and with host governments. For example, agency officials for all three countries reported participating in UAC interagency working groups at each embassy. Agency officials reported that these working groups enabled them to share information, discuss strategy, and coordinate the interagency response. In addition, agency officials reported they have taken various steps to assess host country needs related to the rapid increase in migration. For example:

- The State and USAID officials' responses for Honduras noted they had requested information on assistance needs from the First Lady of

Honduras, who heads the country's unaccompanied child migration task force.

- The USAID officials' responses for all three countries reported that, to help shape the agency's assistance efforts, it assessed all three host governments' capacity to accept repatriated unaccompanied child migrants.
- The DHS official's response for Guatemala reported that DHS officials in Guatemala hold periodic meetings with host government officials to identify possible needs in areas such as addressing the flow of migrants across the border and combating criminal organizations operating out of the country.

In addition, State and USAID officials said they have used DHS data on the locations of origin of UAC to help inform their identification of the causes of migration or programming decisions, in conjunction with other sources of information. Specifically, the State officials' written responses for Guatemala and Honduras indicate that DHS data on the origins of UAC migrants informed the agency's identification of causes of migration. Moreover, State officials in Washington, D.C., told us that, when they began reprioritizing programs in the summer of 2014 in response to the rapid increase in unaccompanied child migration, they consulted DHS's map on UAC locations of origin to help determine where to locate programs. In addition, the USAID official's response for Honduras referenced DHS's map of UAC by location of origin when discussing the variance of causes of UAC migration across Honduras. The USAID official's response for Guatemala indicated that the map informed agency efforts to locate new programs.

According to CBP, Border Patrol agents obtain information on UAC origins by interviewing children—or, in some cases, those traveling with them—who have been apprehended at the U.S. border. According to CBP officials, there are various challenges to obtaining UAC location information. These challenges can include the following:

- The children can be so young that they do not know where they are from.
- The children may offer the name of the largest city near where they are from if they are in fact from a small village near the city.
- There can be a language barrier. Not all agents are equally fluent in Spanish. In addition, State noted that agents may not be fluent in the indigenous languages spoken by many UACs, and that UACs may

report their community of origin by its indigenous name.

- The children usually do not have documents indicating where they came from.
- Smugglers can coach the children to provide a certain location.

CBP officials indicated that if the child does not know where he or she is from, the agent may enter the child's description of his or her home geography into the database field or simply enter the name of the country. In May and July 2014, DHS's Office of Intelligence and Analysis produced two maps of UAC locations of origin based on data it obtained from CBP. Although the first DHS map produced in May 2014 did not include any caveats about the challenges in obtaining this information, the second map produced in July 2014 included language that noted, among other things, that locations in the data were self-reported.¹⁰The USAID official's response for Honduras noted that, in Honduras, USAID and DHS are working with the government to improve its intake, analysis, and mapping of returnees' communities of origin.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We are not making any recommendations in this report. We provided State, USAID, DHS, and MCC a draft of this report for advance review and comment. The agencies did not provide written comments. State, USAID, and DHS provided technical comments, which we have incorporated, as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to interested congressional committees. We are also sending copies to the Secretaries of State and Homeland Security, the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Chief Executive Officer of the Millennium Challenge Corporation. In addition, this report will be available at no charge on the GAO web site at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff has any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-3149 or gootnickd@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last

¹⁰We plan to further analyze agencies' use of UAC location of origin data and other information as it informs assistance targeting and performance evaluation, and we will report on the results of our analysis later this year.

page of this report. GAO staff who made major contributions to this report are listed in appendix II.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Gootnick". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "D".

David Gootnick
Director
International Affairs and Trade

List of Requesters

The Honorable Eliot L. Engel
Ranking Member
Committee on Foreign Affairs
House of Representatives

The Honorable Chris Smith
Chairman
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights and International Organizations
Committee on Foreign Affairs
House of Representatives

The Honorable Albio Sires
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
Committee on Foreign Affairs
House of Representatives

The Honorable Joaquin Castro
House of Representatives

The Honorable Sean Duffy
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

We examined U.S. mission-level efforts to (1) identify causes of the rapid increase in migration of unaccompanied children and (2) address the causes identified. To address these objectives, we developed a set of questions to obtain written responses from mission heads and other U.S. agency officials responsible for programs in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras about the causes they identified for the rapid increase in unaccompanied child migration and the actions they have taken in these three countries to address those causes. Specifically, we obtained responses reflecting the perspectives of the following agency officials in each of the three countries: the ambassadors, regarding Department of State (State) efforts; the mission directors, regarding U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) efforts; and the country attachés, regarding Department of Homeland Security (DHS) efforts. These officials had been designated by their respective agencies as appropriate sources of information about programs in their respective countries. We also contacted Millennium Challenge Corporation officials responsible for programs in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. However, these officials noted that it is not within the corporation's mandate to directly address migration issues and that the corporation has not modified its compact program to address the recent rapid increase in unaccompanied child migration. Therefore, we did not include Millennium Challenge Corporation efforts in this report. This report includes the nine responses from State, USAID, and DHS officials.

We reviewed, analyzed, and tabulated the nine State, USAID, and DHS officials' responses. Specifically, to count the causes agency officials most commonly identified as primarily responsible for the rapid increase in unaccompanied alien child (UAC) migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to the United States, two analysts separately coded and verified all nine agency officials' responses. One analyst first coded all agency officials' responses by type of cause identified. A second analyst then reviewed this coding structure. Any initial disagreements in coding were reconciled between the two analysts. In addition, agency officials reported funding information for some programs developed or modified in response to the rapid increase in UAC migration. However, we did not assess the reliability of the funding data reported by agency officials for this report, and are providing it for background and context only. We also interviewed agency officials in Washington, D.C.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2014 to February 2015 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to

obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings

Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact:

David Gootnick, (202) 512-3149 or gootnickd@gao.gov

Staff**Acknowledgments:**

In addition to the contact named above, Judith Williams, Assistant Director; Joe Carney, Rachel Girshick, Claudia Rodriguez, Ashley Alley, Martin De Alteriis, and Seyda Wentworth made key contributions to this report.

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