GUATEMALAN YOUTH MIGRATION, STATE POLICIES, AND THE QUEST FOR A BETTER LIFE

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by

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Abstract

The influx of unaccompanied indigenous Guatemalan youth migrating to the United States has become a pressing humanitarian concern, with over 60,000 minors apprehended at the southern border in 2022 alone. This paper examines the complex interplay of factors driving this migration, focusing on the Western Highlands departments of Huehuetenango, Quiché, and San Marcos - regions that account for a disproportionate number of child migrants. Through a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of census and migration data with qualitative insights from literature and advocate interviews, this study reveals how poverty, limited educational access, gender-based violence, climate change impacts, and the enduring legacies of settler colonialism converge to propel young people on perilous journeys northward. The findings challenge simplistic narratives of migration, highlighting instead a complex web of push and pull factors rooted in historical inequities and contemporary socio-economic realities. The paper argues that current deterrence-focused policies fail to address the root causes of migration and may exacerbate vulnerabilities. Instead, I propose a rights-based framework for addressing this issue, emphasizing sustainable development, improved educational access, youth empowerment initiatives, and decolonial approaches to aid and policymaking. By situating the phenomenon of unaccompanied child migration within broader historical and socio-economic contexts, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of migration dynamics and advocates for holistic, long-term solutions to a complex and ongoing humanitarian challenge.

Biographical Sketch

Elizabeth Arrazola is a passionate youth advocate with a focus on assisting underserved communities. As an MPS student in Global Development at Cornell University, Elizabeth advanced her skills in project design and public policy focused on equity and justice. As a graduate student Elizabeth conducted policy research and analysis for international NGO partner Girls' Power Initiative and her group research on the economic impacts of child marriage was selected to be presented at the 2024 Association for Public Policy Analysis & Management (APPAM) Fall Conference. While attending Cornell, Elizabeth also worked with the Public Utility Law Project (PULP) as a research advocate and community liaison. This opportunity allowed her to conduct community outreach across Upstate New York and even led a Spanish radio PSA campaign for low-income utility consumers. Elizabeth's work also extended to assisting local farmworkers in upstate New York by providing outreach efforts, data analysis, and policy research along with Director of the Cornell Farmworker Program, Mary Jo Dudley.

Prior to attending Cornell, Elizabeth worked as a Paralegal for both detained and released unaccompanied minors while at the Florence Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project (FIRRP) in Arizona, and Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) in Los Angeles. She also previously served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco where she developed programming to engage rural youth in technical skills training. Elizabeth has also developed ESL programming in Bangkok, Thailand where she interned with refugee youth and their families.

Elizabeth holds a Bachelor of Arts in Geography from the University of California, Los Angeles. She is originally from Inglewood, Los Angeles and is a proud daughter of parents from Oaxaca, Mexico.

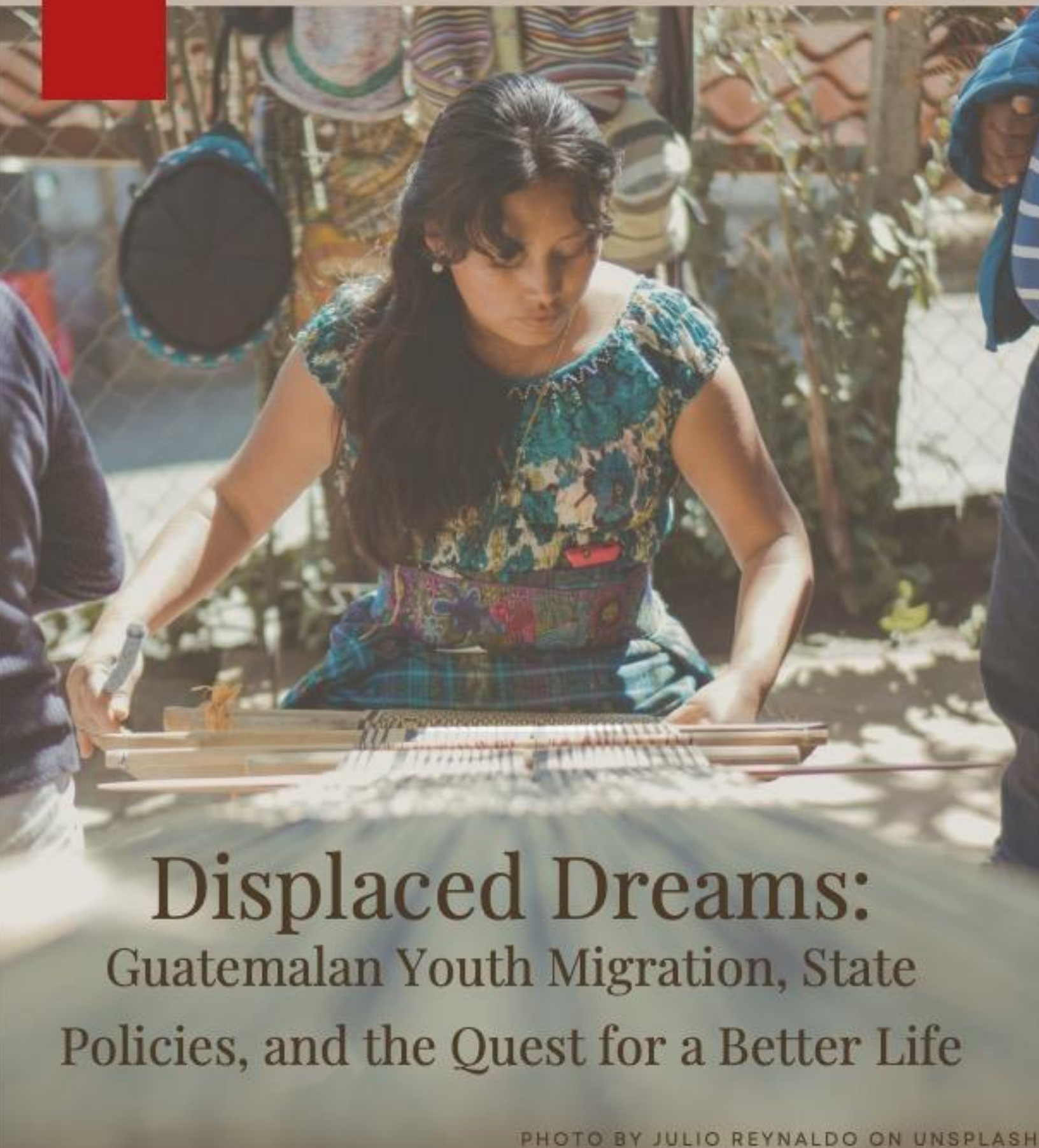
Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who have contributed to the completion of not only this research paper but my experience at Cornell as a whole. To Professor Mildred Warner, the endless well of compassion, expertise, and insight you shared during this process overflowed my cup. I am forever grateful for the growth you inspired in me professionally. Attending your workshop course allowed me to understand equity in policy making through a framework that finally allowed me to understand I belong in the spaces I most feared growing up. Thank you for showing me a new world is possible which includes all ages being able to live with dignity in their communities.

To Professor Mary Jo Dudley, the flame in you provides such urgent support to farmers and youth across the state. Professor Dudley's work is often difficult, full of obstacles, and emotionally heavy, yet she persists and persists and persists. Thank you for showing me what persistence in being an advocate for those most marginalized and ignored among us requires of us. Thank you for showing me what moral clarity and persistence can accomplish is such complicated landscapes.

Finally, to all the Guatemalan youth who persist. Thank you for sharing your joy and persistence.

MPS GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT CAPSTONE 2024



Displaced Dreams:

Guatemalan Youth Migration, State Policies, and the Quest for a Better Life

PHOTO BY JULIO REYNALDO ON UNSPLASH

Elizabeth Arrazola **Faculty Advisor: Mildred Warner**

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Introduction

In 2014, the United States saw a dramatic rise in unaccompanied children migrating to enter the country. These unaccompanied children (UC) continue to migrate in large numbers today, with the largest demographic coming from Guatemala. In 2022, 47% of the unaccompanied children entering the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) program were from Guatemala (ACF, 2023), and more than 60,000 unaccompanied minors were apprehended at the U.S. southern border (*Youth in Guatemala | Guatemala*, 2023). Last year, nearly 50,000 of the 137,000 encounters recorded by border authorities in the last fiscal year were from Guatemala (AP News, 2024), with the three departments (states) with the highest numbers of apprehensions being Huehuetenango, Quiché, and San Marcos in the Western Highlands (Brookings, 2022).

This research paper seeks to better understand the reasons why Indigenous Guatemalan children continue to migrate unaccompanied to the United States, despite the dangers they face traveling alone as minors. How do poverty and limited access to education among indigenous Guatemalan youth contribute to their decision to migrate to the United States?

Methodology

The data sources for this research include USAID, IPUMS, the Administration for Children and Families, various academic journals, demographic data from upstate NY and 2018 Census data from Guatemala. Microsoft Excel was utilized to clean and process the datasets, while ArcGIS was employed to project maps and visualize geospatial information from datasets where shapefiles were unavailable.

It is important to note that this analysis is subject to certain data limitations. Due to privacy considerations, limited information is available on child migrants. Furthermore, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on these sociodemographic groups are not fully captured, as post-2020 data is scarce. Additionally, while the data spans the period from 2018 to 2023, the most recent trends may not be reflected in the analysis.

Census data can be limiting especially for analyzing migration patterns. A recent publication found that the latest Census Bureau report from 2020 "may have missed a substantial share of residents who are not U.S. citizens." (Hansi, 2023) I also utilized data from the Migration Policy Institute to gather more information on migration trends. Data from the IMF was used to analyze changes in remittance patterns tied to migration trends.

Interviews with advocates were conducted to analyze the trends they have heard from working with Guatemalan youth clients.

Indigenous Reasons for Migration

The experiences of Indigenous Maya youth and families who migrate from Guatemala are shaped by a complex interplay of structural factors, including settler colonialism, state violence, and free trade agreements, which have created conditions that compel difficult migration decisions (Gil-García et al., 2023). Research by Gil-García proposes a relational socio-cultural analytic lens that synthesizes settler colonial theory and the theory of racialized legal status to better understand these experiences. This lens illuminates how nation-states co-produce stateless Indigenous populations and how these populations persist and demonstrate resilience across the Americas.

Data from the 2018 Guatemalan Census was used to highlight the Departments (States) in Guatemala with the highest Mayan population. As seen in Figure 1, the Mayan population is concentrated more heavily in the northern and western parts of Guatemala, especially in the departments of Alta Verapaz, Quiché, Huehuetenango, Totonicapán, and Sololá.

Figure 1

Mayan Population Across Guatemala Normalized by Total Population

Figure created by author.

Spatial Reference
Name: WGS 1984 Web Mercator Auxiliary Sphere
Projection: Mercator Auxiliary Sphere
Datasource: Guatemala Census, 2018
Figure created by author.

The following sections use Gil-Garcia's analytical framework to study the effects colonial history, poverty, gender-based violence (GBV), climate change and education play a role in indigenous youth migration from Guatemala. Applying this analytic framework can help account for the complex historical and contemporary factors that drive migration and shape the experiences of these youth across borders.

Indigenous History and Its Influence on Migration Patterns

The history of indigenous people in Guatemala is critical to understand current youth migration trends. The rate that youth are leaving the country of Guatemala in search of safety, economic

opportunities, and to meet moral obligations is tied to the history Indigenous people have experienced in Guatemala.

Figure 2

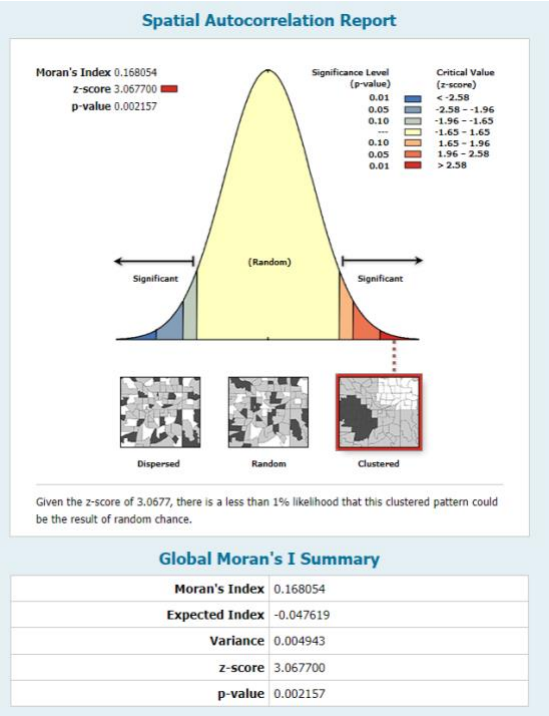
Map of Unaccompanied Minors by Department Normalized by Population 4-19

Spatial Reference
Name: WGS 1984 Web Mercator Auxiliary Sphere
Projection: Mercator Auxiliary Sphere
Datasource: Guatemala Census (2018)
USAID GT, Irregular migration, Sociodemography and Portfolio (2022)

Figure created by author.

USAID data was used to depict the place of origin of apprehended minors at the U.S. border from the years 2018-2022. Figure 2 depicts this spatial distribution normalized by the population aged 4-19 years old. The departments with the highest rates, ranging from 41.3 to 74.7, are shown in dark red. These include Huehuetenango, Quiché, Totonicapán, and parts of Quetzaltenango and Sololá. The departments with moderate rates, between 20.6 and 41.2, are shown in orange and include areas like Alta Verapaz, Petén, and parts of Quetzaltenango. The departments with lower rates, ranging from 1.68 to 20.5, are shown in yellow and cover areas like Guatemala, Sacatepéquez, and parts of Baja Verapaz.

Figure 3



This figure provides insights into the regional variations in the issue of unaccompanied minors within Guatemala. The departments with the highest rates of unaccompanied minors on the map, such as Huehuetenango, Quiché, Totonicapán, and parts of Quetzaltenango and Sololá, correspond to the areas highlighted as having high concentrations of indigenous Mayan populations.

The hypotheses that indigenous youth from Guatemala migrate at higher rates was confirmed using a spatial analysis (Global Moran's I) statistical measure shown in Figure 3. The positive Moran's Index value (0.168054) and the statistically significant p-value (0.002157) indicate the presence of spatial clustering, meaning that departments with similar numbers of unaccompanied minors are located near each other. This finding confirms that the origins of unaccompanied minors are not randomly distributed but rather clustered in specific regions or departments, suggesting the influence of underlying spatial factors or regional characteristics.

Figure 4 visually confirms these results in a Anselin Local Moran's I analysis. The spatial clustering pattern highlights hotspots for unaccompanied minor migration, guides further analysis of potential drivers, and informs targeted interventions to address the root causes of child migration in the identified regions. Departments colored in pink represent a high-high cluster, indicating spatial clustering of high rates of unaccompanied minor origins in Huehuetenango and its neighboring departments. This suggests underlying regional factors contributing to this issue in that area.

The department in bright red, consists solely of Guatemala, which is home to Guatemala City - the largest city in Central America. (Britannica, 2024) This is a high-low outlier, meaning it has high rates of unaccompanied minor while surrounded by departments with relatively lower rates, making it a spatial outlier. This may be because the department of Guatemala is the most populous. The light blue areas are low-low clusters, with neighboring departments exhibiting low rates of unaccompanied minor origins. This analysis highlights the concentrated hot spot in Huehuetenango and identifies outlier departments with high or low rates compared to their neighbors, aiding in understanding the geographic patterns and potential drivers behind the origin of unaccompanied minors in Guatemala.

Figure 4

Cluster and Outlier Analysis (Anselin Local Moran's I) of Origin of Unaccompanied Minors.

Spatial Reference
Name: WGS 1984 Web Mercator Auxiliary Sphere
Projection: Mercator Auxiliary Sphere
Datasource: Guatemala Census, 2018
Figure created by author.

The legacy of colonialism and the brutal 36-year civil war in Guatemala have had profound and enduring impacts on indigenous Mayan communities, shaping their experiences of marginalization, cultural devaluation, and structural inequality that persist into the present day. As

Turner and Luna Sánchez (2020) explain, the Spanish colonizers sought to eradicate indigenous practices and knowledge, forcing assimilation, and causing widespread death through disease and violence. This historical trauma has led to ongoing discrimination, impoverishment, and displacement of Mayan communities, undermining their cultural traditions and connection to the land. While indigenous youth migrate at higher rates than non-indigenous Guatemalan youth, there are still several other factors that contribute to irregular youth migration including socio-economic factors.

These historical factors are critical to understanding the current youth migration trends in Guatemala, as the rate at which young people are leaving the country in search of safety, economic opportunities, and to meet moral obligations is inextricably tied to the experiences of indigenous people.

During the civil war from 1960 to 1996, over 200,000 lives were claimed, with indigenous Mayans accounting for an astonishing 83% of those killed. (PBS NewsHour, 2011) This disproportionate impact on indigenous communities has left deep scars and ongoing challenges. In 1960, Guatemala's youth population under 19 years of age comprised over 50% of the total population (Figure 5). However, by 2014, the year that saw a surge of nearly 115,000 unaccompanied minors from the Northern Triangle countries (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) entering the United States, (D'Vera Cohn et al., 2017) the youth population under 19 had already begun to decrease (Figure 6). This trend continues in the most recent population pyramid for 2023, with youth representing a shrinking percentage of the total population (Figure 7).

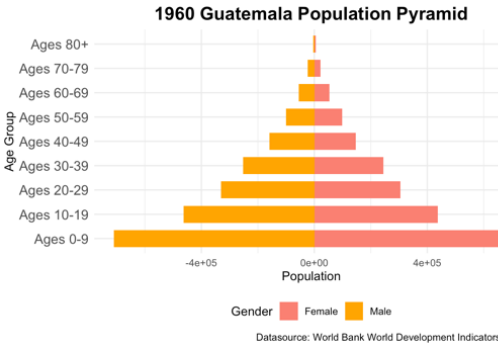


Figure 5

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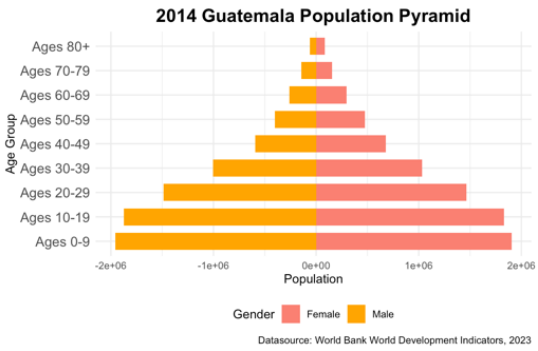

Figure 6

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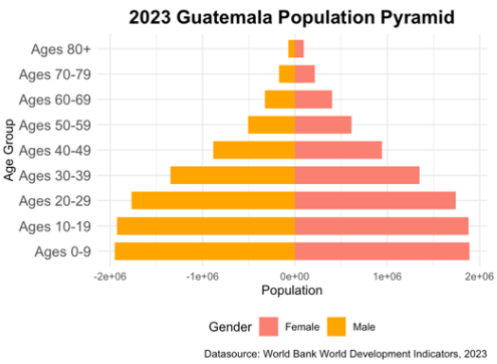


Figure 7

Figure created by author.

The historical trauma, ongoing marginalization, and devaluation of indigenous identities and epistemologies, rooted in the colonial era and exacerbated by the civil war, have fueled the poverty, lack of opportunities, and distress that motivate many indigenous Guatemalan youth to seek a better life elsewhere. The erosion of the youth population, as evidenced by the changing demographics in the population pyramids, underscores the urgent need to address the complex historical and contemporary factors driving migration. Recognizing and grappling with the enduring legacies of colonialism and the civil war is crucial for understanding the experiences of indigenous Guatemalan youth and the forces shaping their migration decisions. Ultimately, a decolonizing lens, which acknowledges the historical and ongoing oppression faced by indigenous communities, is essential for developing effective strategies to support indigenous youth and create alternative pathways for their future well-being and success.

Indigenous Socioeconomic Factors Contributing to Irregular Youth Migration

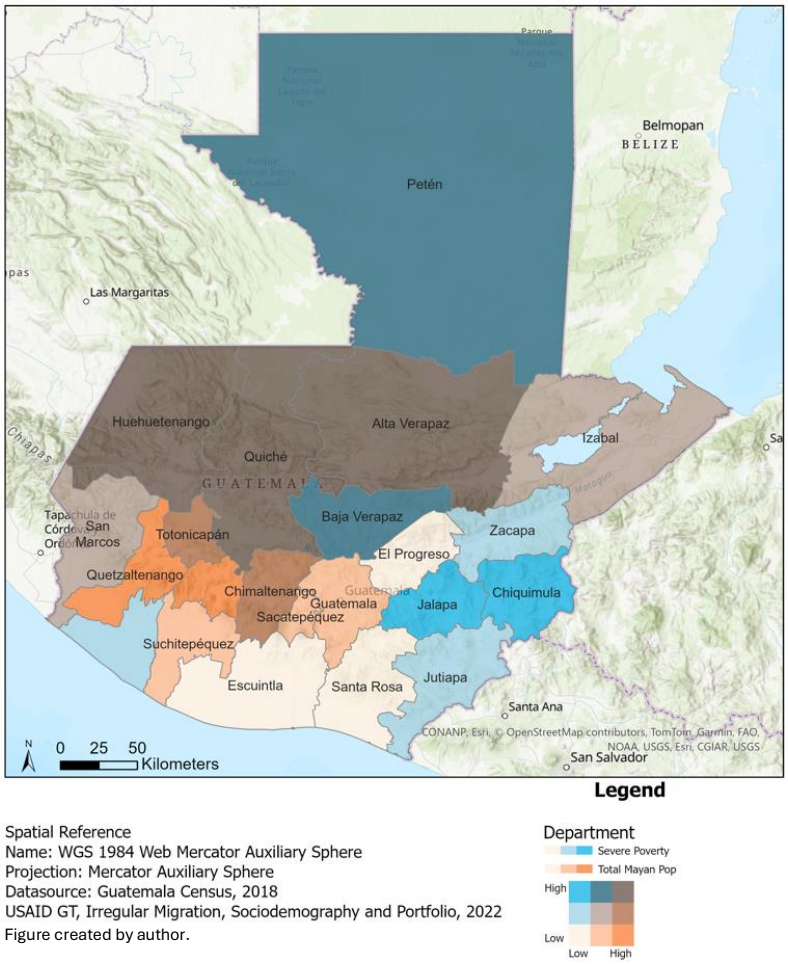
While Guatemala boasts the largest economy in Central America, 79% of its indigenous population lives in poverty, defines as $5.5 USD per person per day, adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP) in 2011 dollars. (World, Bank, 2020) This poverty is a crucial driver behind the migration of indigenous Guatemalan youth to the United States, as these young people often

face difficult decisions due to pressures of safety, family obligations, and aspirations for better futures.

Figure 8 shows a strong spatial correlation between departments with high proportions of Mayan population and those experiencing high levels of severe poverty. The northern and western departments with large Mayan populations like Alta Verapaz, Quiché and Huehuetenango also exhibit high severe poverty rates. In contrast, departments in the south and east like Guatemala, Escuintla, and Santa Rosa have lower Mayan population percentages and correspondingly lower severe poverty levels.

Figure 8

Severe Poverty and Mayan Population



Spatial Reference
Name: WGS 1984 Web Mercator Auxiliary Sphere
Projection: Mercator Auxiliary Sphere
Datasource: Guatemala Census, 2018
USAID GT, Irregular Migration, Sociodemography and Portfolio, 2022
Figure created by author.

The case of Nebaj, a Mayan town in Guatemala (Stoll, 2022), illustrates how socioeconomic factors drive youth migration to the U.S. Despite rising education levels, families face underemployment and limited economic opportunities, pushing adolescents to seek work in the U.S. as a path to a better future. The lack of local jobs to support families and cover secondary education costs drives this "migration hope machine." While risky, the lure of higher U.S. wages outweighs local options. Carletto et al. (2021) further highlights migrant households' economic vulnerability, showing how the 2008 recession substantially impacted child nutrition due to remittance declines.

While economic instability and lack of opportunities are significant drivers of youth migration from Guatemala, gender-based violence also plays a major role, particularly for indigenous women and girls. The conditions of poverty and marginalization that disproportionately affect indigenous communities exacerbate the risks of gender-based violence. This violence, in turn, becomes another push factor forcing indigenous women and girls to undertake the journey of migrating to the United States in search of safety and security. The following section examines how gender-based violence intersects with indigenous identity to shape the migration experiences of Guatemalan women and girls.

Gender-Based Violence and Its Impact on Indigenous Women's Migration

The historical legacy of Guatemala's civil war, during which violence against indigenous women was used as a tool of terror and genocide, continues to shape the high rates of femicide and sexual assault in the country today.

Clemens (2021) analyzed data on unaccompanied Guatemalan child migrant apprehensions in the U.S. from 2011-2016, finding a strong correlation between increased homicide rates in Guatemalan municipalities and higher child migrant apprehensions, independent of economic factors. (Clemens, 2021) This underscores

Figure 9

Reported Female Child Violence by Department (2022)

Spatial Reference
Name: WGS 1984 Web Mercator Auxiliary Sphere
Projection: Mercator Auxiliary Sphere
Datasource: National Institute of Statistics, with data from the Institute of National Forensic Sciences of Guatemala, 2022.

Figure created by author.

the importance of addressing widespread violence, beyond just economic conditions, to mitigate pressures driving child migration.

Figure 10
Reported Violence Against Women Ages 13-30, Years 2019-2021

Spatial Reference
Name: WGS 1984 Web Mercator Auxiliary Sphere
Projection: Mercator Auxiliary Sphere
Datasource: Sistema Informativo de Control de la Investigación del Ministerio Público (SICOMP)
Figure created by author.

Figures 9 and 10 depict reported cases of violence against women and girls across Guatemalan departments in 2022 and 2019-2021 respectively. In Figure 9, the darker red shaded areas like Huehuetenango, Quiché, and Alta Verapaz have the highest percentages (73%-88%) of reported female child violence cases. In Figure 10, the darker purple shaded areas like Guatemala and Escuintla have the highest numbers (7325-15907 cases) of reported violence against young women during this period. Both maps highlight how certain departments, particularly those with higher indigenous populations in the western and northern regions, experience disproportionately higher levels of gender-based violence targeting women and girls.

Through in-depth case studies of Mam women from Huehuetenango, Guatemala, Stephen illustrates how "gendered embodied structures of violence" rooted in the region's history of militarization have persisted in the form of local security committees, gangs, and organized crime networks that perpetrate physical, sexual, and psychological abuse against women. (Stephen, 2018)

For indigenous girls from the Western Highlands, the decision to migrate unaccompanied is shaped by intersecting inequalities, marginalization, violence, and the search for safety and opportunities (Stephen, 2018; Pop No'j Association, 2023). Indigenous women and girls face multiple layers of vulnerability and violence as they navigate their journeys from Guatemala to the United States. Beyond gender-based violence, lack of access to quality education represents another major structural barrier confronting indigenous youth, particularly girls, propelling them to undertake risky migration journeys in pursuit of better futures.

Lack of Educational Opportunities and Its Influence on Migration

Guatemala faces significant challenges in its education system, despite progress in primary school enrollment rates over the past two decades. Disparities persist between boys and girls, urban and rural areas, and indigenous and non-indigenous communities. This lack of educational access and quality is a major driver of unaccompanied indigenous youth migration from the Western Highlands region. (USAID, Guatemala Education, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these challenges, with students in municipalities with higher infection rates experiencing worse educational outcomes, including increased dropout rates, reduced likelihood of advancing to the next grade, and a shift from private to public schools (World Bank, 2023).

Using data from Guatemala's 2018 Census, the following Figures (Figures 11-13) depict youth respondents answers as to why they were not attending school. The figures investigate three specific reasons mentioned; 1) There are no facilities nearby 2) Family does not have the money to afford sending me, and 3) Youth mentioned having to work rather than attend school.

Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13

Figures 11-13 source: Author's analysis of Guatemala 2018 Census data. N = 14.9 million. Figures created by author.

Figures 11-13 depict data from Guatemala's 2018 Census, highlighting the overlap between departments with high numbers of unaccompanied child migrants and those where youth cited lack of finances, lack of nearby school facilities, and the need to work instead of study as reasons for not attending school. The western departments of Huehuetenango, San Marcos, and Quiché emerge as hotspots for these issues, suggesting poverty, inadequate educational infrastructure, and economic pressures contribute to minors' decisions to migrate unaccompanied in search of opportunities.

Regression analysis (Figure 14) further reinforces this connection, revealing a strong positive relationship between higher percentages of the indigenous Maya population and greater prevalence of insufficient funds cited as a barrier to education. The strong positive relationship (adjusted R-squared = 0.66) suggests that as the percentage of the Maya population increases, the lack of financial resources for education becomes more prevalent. This finding highlights the significant impact of poverty and limited access to education among indigenous Guatemalan youth on their decision to migrate. The high spatial autocorrelation value (0.83) indicates that these issues are

concentrated in specific regions, likely the areas with a higher proportion of indigenous Maya population.

Highest Adjusted R-Squared Results

AdjR2	AICc	JB	K(BP)	VIF	SA	Model
0.66	498.71	0.10	0.22	1.00	0.83	+MAYA.CSV.PER_MAYA***

Figures 14. Author's analysis of Guatemala 2018 Census data. N = 14.9 million. Figure created by author.

While efforts including transnational aid organizations have promoted education to prevent youth migration, Nichols' (2022) ethnography in an indigenous community illustrates how structural barriers, poor educational quality, and limited employment undermine this promise. Indigenous youth view educational striving as temporarily avoiding migration while resisting historical marginalization, but face "cruel optimism" as the education system often fails to provide viable local futures. (Nichols, 2022) In her study, indigenous Maya youth viewed educational attainment as a means to temporarily avoid migration and confront the historical legacies of being denied access to education. However, their educational striving can become a form of "cruel optimism," as they invest significant time, money, and effort into an education system that often fails to provide viable pathways to a better future within their communities.

Another study by Dougherty and Rubin (2016) illustrates how teachers' approaches to the Spanish conquest and colonial era often serve to perpetuate the distance between indigenous and Ladino citizens. In an indigenous school setting, the teacher framed colonialism as an ongoing part of students' lived realities, emphasizing language loss, discrimination, and cultural devaluation. Students articulated a usable past that connected this colonial legacy to their contemporary

struggles. In contrast, in an affluent Ladino school, the colonial period was presented as a distant, completed past, with little connection drawn to present inequities. (Dougherty and Rubin, 2016)

Ultimately, the educational inequities faced by indigenous youth, grounded in Guatemala's colonial legacy and manifesting in financial constraints, infrastructure deficits, and low educational quality and relevance, fuel the drivers of unaccompanied migration as they seek better futures elsewhere. However, these structural barriers intersect with another increasingly prominent factor shaping migration decisions for Guatemala's rural and indigenous communities - climate change impacts.

Climate Change

Climate change is a leading contributor to migration trends across the globe, particularly in Central America, climate change is leading to the exodus of young people. According to Garrison et al., "There is growing consensus that crop damage from climate change is among the complex reasons for food shortages, and migration decisions, in Guatemala." (Garrison et al., 2023) Additionally, data from the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) found that "as much as a quarter of Guatemala's population - up to 4.6 million people - suffered food shortages over the past year." (Garrison et al., 2023) Guatemalan youth are further pushed to migrate due to the obligations to care for their parents and younger siblings as well as actual hunger that is becoming increasingly more insidious due to climate change.

Using data from the World Bank, the following three figures show climate trends in Guatemala from 1960-2020. Figure 15 plot shows that agricultural land area in Guatemala has been steadily increasing each decade from 1960 to 2020. While Figure 16 reveals that the percent of land area covered by forest in Guatemala has been declining consistently from 1990 to 2020, dropping from

around 44% to 33% over those 30 years. Figure 17 indicates that CO2 emissions in Guatemala have risen substantially from 1990 to 2020, more than doubling over that 30-year period.

Figure 15

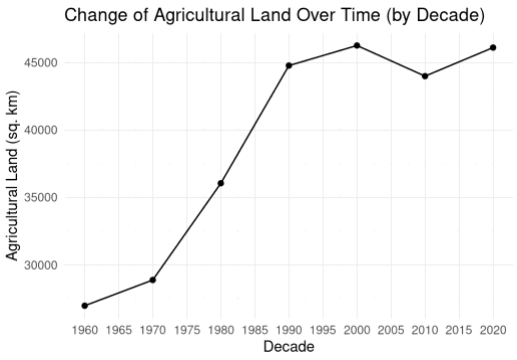


Figure 16

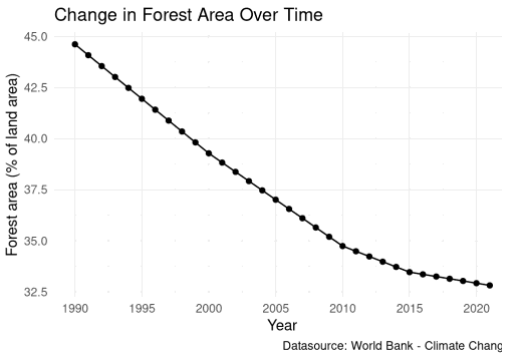
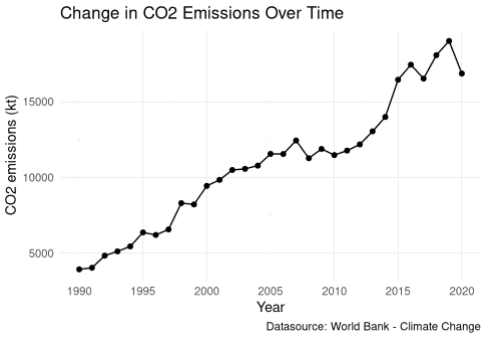


Figure 17



Source for figures 15-17: Author's analysis of World Bank Climate Data from the years 1960-2020. Figures created by author.

The data demonstrate that climate change is having a significant impact in Guatemala, likely contributing to food shortages and migration pressures, especially among youth. Over the past 30 years, forest area has declined precipitously as agricultural land has expanded, while at the same time CO2 emissions have more than doubled. This deforestation and increase in emissions align with the growing consensus that crop damage from climate change is leading to food shortages for up to a quarter of Guatemala's population. (Garrison et al., 2023) Facing obligations to support their families amidst spreading hunger, many Guatemalan youth are pushed to migrate elsewhere.

The next section speaks on that 'elsewhere' and the possible implications contemporary state policies have on Guatemalan youth migrants.

State Policies and Their Implications for Guatemalan Migrants

Latin American refugee children are exposed to a wide range of traumatic events, including violence, persecution, family separation, and dangerous journeys, which are associated with increased risk for mental health issues such as PTSD, depression, anxiety, and suicidality (King, 2022). High rates of trauma exposure and the recent spike in unaccompanied minors at the U.S.

border necessitate a reassessment of policies related to refugee caps, asylum screenings, and interception practices to better protect and support these vulnerable children (King, 2022).

A critical lens while analyzing contemporary policy is crucial to understand the impact indigenous Guatemalan youth may experience upon entering the United States. The following section touches on the busing of migrants in NY and access to reproductive rights and healthcare in Arizona and NY followed by interviews with advocates who work with indigenous Guatemalan youth across the US and in Guatemala.

New York State: Busing Migrants to Rural Upstate New York

As cities grapple with the influx of immigrants and the strain on their shelter systems, policies limiting stays and lengthy readmission processes can leave vulnerable populations, such as unaccompanied minors from Guatemala, in a precarious position. Forced to navigate a patchwork of temporary sleeping arrangements in churches and mosques while awaiting shelter access, these young migrants may find it difficult to secure the stability necessary to pursue education, find employment, and build a new life. The need for comprehensive and child-sensitive solutions to address the unique needs of young Guatemalan migrants and ensure their protection and well-being as they seek safety and opportunity in the United States is becoming more difficult. (Wessler, 2024)

The busing of migrants to other states like New York began in Texas with Operation Lone Star, launched by Governor Greg Abbott in 2021, has been a controversial response to the increased migration at the Texas-Mexico border. (“Operation Lone Star”) While the operation aims to enhance border security by deploying state law enforcement and military personnel, Operation Lone Star violates the Supremacy Clause of the U.S. Constitution by usurping the federal

government's exclusive authority over immigration enforcement and enacting state-level immigration policies that intentionally discriminate based on race and national origin. (ILRC, 2023)

The experiences of migrants and asylum-seekers being bused to rural communities in upstate New York shed light on the potential challenges young Guatemalan migrants may face upon arrival in the United States. I spoke with Mary Jo Dudley, director of the Cornell Farmworker Program and who works with many young Guatemalans. Dudley stated young Guatemalans fleeing violence and seeking a better life may encounter a series of displacements, instability, and hostility in their new communities. They may struggle to access resources, find employment, and integrate into society due to language barriers, delays in obtaining work permits, and discrimination. The lack of comprehensive support systems and the overburdened nature of local nonprofits may further exacerbate the difficulties these young migrants face as they attempt to build a new life in an unfamiliar and sometimes unwelcoming environment. (Dudley, Mary Jo. Personal interview. 19 March 2024.) Further input from Dudley is provided in the following section.

Florida: Health Care and Employment Policies

The experiences of people without legal documentation in the United States, are multifaceted as they face financial constraints, fear of deportation, low health literacy, language and cultural differences, discrimination, and as in the case of Florida, new restrictive immigration policies that further hinder access to care.

State policies like State Bill 1718 (SB1718) that require healthcare providers to collect information on patients' immigration status can have detrimental impacts on immigrant communities, including Guatemalan youth migrants. Such measures deter many immigrants from seeking necessary

medical care for themselves or their children due to fears around exposing their legal status, which often leads to worsening health conditions and higher treatment costs from delayed care (August 2023). These policies also place substantial strain on healthcare workers who may be compelled to inquire about immigration status against their ethical principles of providing impartial care. Despite undocumented immigrants contributing billions in tax revenues that fund public health programs, they are denied access to services like Medicaid (Augut, 2023). Importantly, research shows punitive immigration laws quantifiably reduce prenatal care among immigrant women and pediatric visits for immigrant children, negatively affecting this vulnerable population's health outcomes (Woolhandler et al., 2022). Healthcare providers face ethical and legal considerations in sharing patients' immigration status, which is arguably protected health information under HIPAA (August, 2023).

SB1718 further deteriorates the health of young Guatemalan migrants who can't afford healthcare due to limited financial resources and lack of insurance coverage. The pervasive fear of deportation and family separation can lead to delays in seeking necessary medical attention. Low health literacy and limited English proficiency can further impede their ability to navigate the complex U.S. healthcare system and communicate effectively with providers. Moreover, discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and immigration status may deter them from accessing services. Additionally, policies that discourage immigrants from seeking care by requiring hospitals to collect immigration status information may inadvertently disrupt essential social networks, further marginalizing an already vulnerable population.

Advocate Interviews

The following interviews were conducted over the course of several months with three separate advocates working in providing social, legal, and other services to Guatemalan youth migrants in

the United States and in the case of Luis Argueta, in Guatemala. There insights provided insight into the contemporary issues Guatemalan youth face in their decisions to migrate as well as the barriers in finding stability in the United States due to policies.

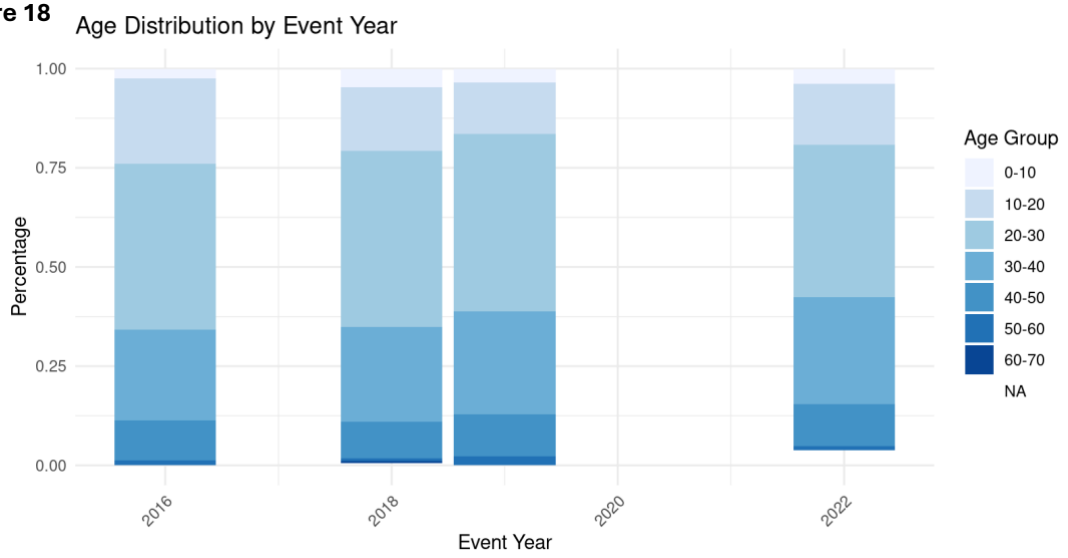
Interview with Mary Jo Dudley, Director of the Cornell Farmworker Program

Mary Jo Dudley's initial experience with Guatemalan migration began with a research project in Florida, where she accompanied and studied farmworkers along the East Coast migrant travel stream. Dudley noted that Indian Town, Florida, serves as a crucial point where Guatemalan migrants connect with family, friends, and community members, providing essential support for immigrant youth.

Dudley's work with Guatemalan youth intensified when people were fleeing war and targeted political persecution in their home country. She was involved in providing sanctuary to some of these families through faith organizations. However, she pointed out that while sanctuary offers a safe space, it can also be constraining. Dudley shared the story of a family with five children who were brought from Guatemala to upstate New York, highlighting the challenges they faced, such as limited mobility, language barriers, and difficulties in social integration.

The following figures (Figure 18-19) show the mean age of entry for male and female individuals from Guatemala who attended events held by the Cornell Farmworker Program from years 2016-2022.

Figure 18



Source: Author's analysis of Cornell Farmworker Program from the years 2016-2022. N=450. Figure created by author.

Additionally, figure 20 shows the age distribution of individuals who attended an event held by the Cornell Farmworker Program from the years 2016-2022. The largest age group cohorts are ages 20-30 years of age.

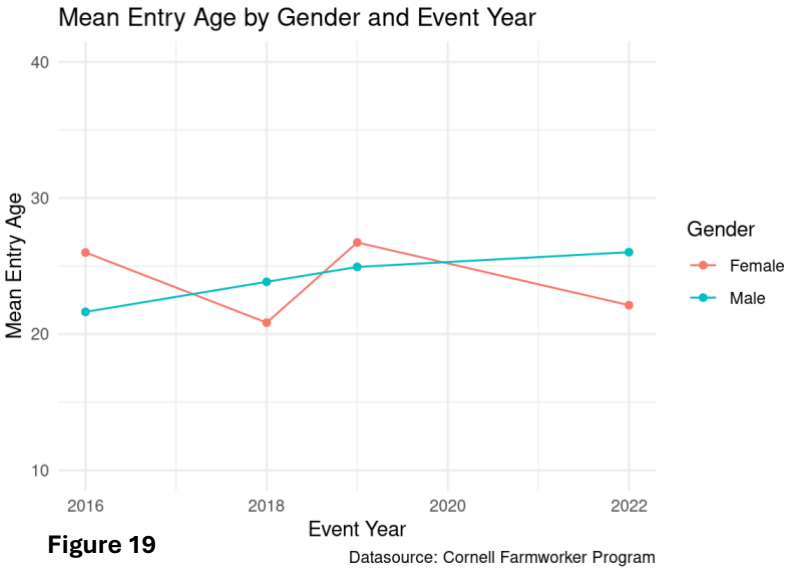


Figure 19

Source: Author's analysis of Cornell Farmworker Program from the years 2016-2022. N=450. Figure created by author.

Mean Entry Age by Gender and Event Year

Event Year	Gender	Mean Age
2016	Female	26.00
2016	Male	21.63
2018	Female	20.84
2018	Male	23.84
2019	Female	26.73
2019	Male	24.94
2022	Female	22.12
2022	Male	26.02

Figure 20

Source: Author's analysis of Cornell Farmworker Program from the years 2016-2022. N=450. Figure created by author.

According to Dudley, unaccompanied Guatemalan children face an added significant challenge as their ability to remain in the United States is often dependent on school attendance. These youth often struggle with being placed in grades based on age rather than ability, lacking English language skills, and having limited social networks. Additionally, many unaccompanied minors have work responsibilities after school, which limits their ability to participate in extracurricular activities and interact with peers, leading to a solitary experience.

Dudley identified several reasons for the migration of Guatemalan youth, particularly young girls, including increased gang violence in their communities, sexual abuse and violence, and parents' inability to cope with their children's adolescent transitions. She noted that young girls are more easily targeted for trafficking and may be lured by the promise of an adult caregiver. Dudley also highlighted the cultural constraints faced by young girls, who are often trained to assume a submissive position, in contrast to young men who are equipped to adopt a macho role.

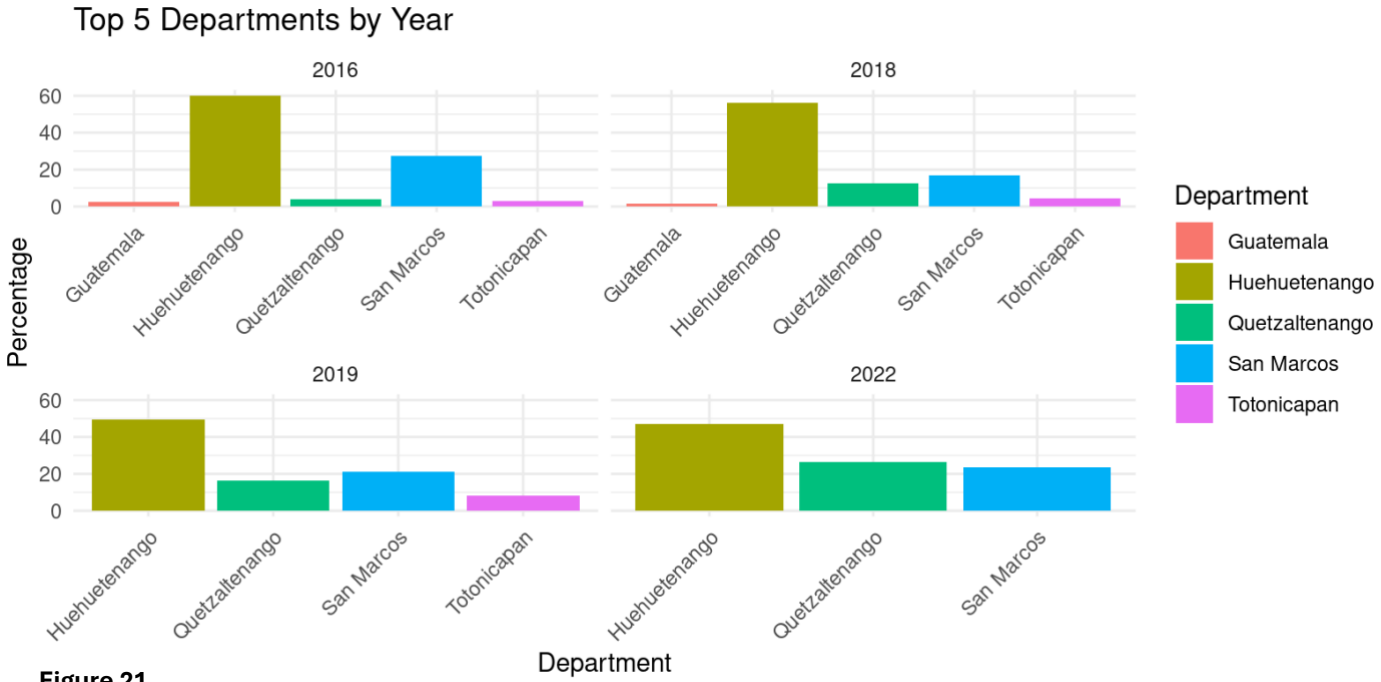


Figure 21

Author's analysis of Migrant Farmworkers origin distribution.
N=450. Figure created by author.

Datasource: Cornell Farmworkers Program, 2016-2022

Dudley mentioned indigenous youth face more significant barriers due to cultural and language barriers in the United States. She noted a significant number of individuals she assists come from the indigenous department of Huehuetenango. Figure 21 displays the top departments where individuals originate from who have attended an event held by the Cornell Farmworker Program. The departments featured in the top 5 across these years include Guatemala, Huehuetenango, Quetzaltenango, San Marcos, and Totonicapán.

Dudley mentioned the migration of young Guatemalan girls impacts their families and communities back home in various ways. Economically, their work in the United States provides financial support and increases the purchasing power of their families. However, their absence results in a decrease in household labor, particularly affecting their mothers. Socially and psychologically, the separation from siblings can disrupt support systems, and families may experience added worry about the well-being and safety of their children during their journey and upon arrival in the United States.

Interview with Cindy Liou, U.S. State and Local Policy Director at Kids in Need of Defense (KIND)

Cindy Liou, the U.S. State and Local Policy Director at Kids in Need of Defense (KIND), has been working with unaccompanied minors, specifically those from Guatemala, since 2016. In an interview, Liou shared valuable insights into the challenges faced by Guatemalan youth upon arrival in the United States and the impact of current policies on their protection and support.

According to Liou, one of the most significant challenges for Guatemalan youth is the fear created by policies such as Senate Bill 4 in Texas which makes crossing the Texas-Mexico border between ports of entry a state crime. (Mendez, 2024) Liou also highlighted the hospital immigration policy in Florida, which are designed to make immigrants feel unwelcome and prevent them from

accessing basic services. These policies, along with ICE raids, strike fear in communities, making it difficult for young people to engage in everyday activities like grocery shopping.

Liou emphasized the importance of providing opportunities for recreation and belonging to prevent youth from joining gangs for protection. She also highlighted the need for policies that allocate funding for bilingual and multilingual services, interpreters in court, and legal services for immigrants. Currently, immigration legal services remain underfunded compared to civil legal services, leaving immigrants at the mercy of funders and governments.

To support the successful integration of Guatemalan youth, Liou stressed the importance of a community-based approach that celebrates diversity and helps newcomers retain their language and cultural identity. She recommended programs and policies that work hand in hand, such as California's "Together" program and the National Newcomer Network, which focus on multilingual education and inclusion.

Liou also emphasized the need to address the trauma, grief, and loss experienced by young immigrants who have lost their community, peer networks, and way of life. She suggested that schools provide services for students to help them regain a sense of self and celebrate their traditions, such as stocking food pantries with cultural options.

Liou's insights highlight the importance of creating policies and practices that promote inclusion, celebrate diversity, and provide meaningful support to unaccompanied minors from Guatemala. By addressing the unique challenges faced by these youth and implementing community-based approaches, the United States can foster their successful integration and well-being (C. Liou, personal communication, 16 April 2024).

Interview with Luis Argueta, Documentary Filmmaker

In an interview with Guatemalan-American filmmaker Luis Argueta, who has been documenting transnational immigrant stories since 1977, several key factors influencing youth migration from Guatemala were discussed. Argueta mentioned that family reunification seems to be "in their DNA," with the expectation to migrate deeply ingrained in the culture. He also highlighted the lack of recreation and services in Guatemala as a direct result of corrupt governments, leading to boredom and limited opportunities for youth. Argueta's work-in-progress, "Ausencia," explores these issues and the impact of migration on children left behind. In a poignant scene from the film, a young Guatemalan girl named Feliciana shares her perspective on the trauma experienced by her community:

Feliciana: "I believe one of the traumas more widespread here is the absence of parents and uncles and grandparents."

Luis: "And what color is that absence?"

Feliciana: "Black" (Argueta, "Ausencia").

Feliciana's words underscore the profound emotional toll that family separation due to migration has on the children and communities left behind in Guatemala. Argueta also shed light on the challenges of returning to Guatemala after living in the United States, citing examples of individuals who become accustomed to the lifestyle and material possessions they acquire, even while living with the constant threat of deportation. He emphasized the role of community networks, such as churches in Worthington, Minnesota, and Postville, Iowa, in providing support for new immigrants and their children. Lastly, Argueta discussed the language and legal barriers faced by immigrants, particularly the need for interpreters in court and the "assembly line" style

of hearing cases in places like the Tucson docket (L. Argueta, personal communication, February 26, 2024).

Policy Recommendations

Building on my analysis of the complex factors driving indigenous Guatemalan youth migration, including poverty, lack of educational access, gender-based violence, and climate change impacts, I now turn to policy recommendations that address these root causes while recognizing the potential benefits of well-managed migration. By addressing both push and pull factors, these policies seek to transform the precarious journey of unaccompanied indigenous youth into opportunities for growth, cultural preservation, and sustainable development in both Guatemala and the United States.

Expand temporary worker visa programs: The U.S. should increase temporary worker visas for Guatemalans, addressing labor shortages while providing legal pathways for work-seeking migrants (Beitsch, 2024). This initiative must also provide a pathway for undocumented workers in the United States who are here already working in the agricultural sector especially. This aligns with the recommendations Mary Jo Dudley, Director of the Cornell Farmworker Program set forth which considers the contributions undocumented farmworkers in NY have in the local workforce economy.

Enhance the Safe Mobility Initiative: Expand Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs) to include more accessible labor mobility pathways (Beitsch, 2024).

Implement programs like "Youth with Purpose": Scale up initiatives providing academic and technical training, soft skills development, and employment access to Guatemalan youth (U.S. Embassy Guatemala, 2024).

Strengthen anti-corruption efforts: Continue supporting integrity units within Guatemalan government offices to combat corruption and attract foreign investment (Beitsch, 2024).

Develop bilateral labor agreements: Create agreements between Guatemala and the U.S. to match migrants' skills with destination country needs, as suggested by the World Bank (World Bank, 2023).

Improve remittance infrastructure: Guatemala should work to lower remittance costs and facilitate knowledge transfers from its diaspora (World Bank, 2023).

Invest in climate resilience: Develop programs to address climate change impacts in Guatemala, reducing climate-driven migration (World Bank, 2023).

These recommendations are designed to address the complex, multifaceted nature of indigenous Guatemalan youth migration while recognizing the potential benefits of well-managed migration. They align with the World Bank's call for better migration policies to boost prosperity in all countries (World Bank, 2023). By creating more options for legal, circular migration and improving conditions in Guatemala, these policies can lead to more positive outcomes for migrants, their communities of origin, and both countries involved. They consider the changing global demographics, with many countries facing aging populations and increasing reliance on migration for economic growth. By focusing on skill-matching, development in origin countries, and international cooperation, these recommendations aim to make migration a stronger force for development while addressing the unique challenges faced by indigenous Guatemalan youth. These recommendations take a holistic approach, addressing both push and pull factors of migration, respecting the agency of migrants, and fostering development in Guatemala while also meeting labor needs in the United States.

Pragmatism, Right to Opacity, and "Second-Best" Approaches in Asylum Policy

While the policy recommendations outlined earlier represent ideal solutions, we must acknowledge the political and practical challenges in implementing comprehensive reforms. In the realm of politicized migration policy, perfect solutions are often elusive, and advocates, policymakers, and researchers must frequently work with "second-best" approaches.

The concept of the "right to opacity," as articulated by Édouard Glissant, provides a critical framework for understanding the complexities of the asylum-seeking experience. This concept challenges the Western desire for transparency and complete understanding of the Other, advocating instead for respecting the inherent complexity and unknowability of individuals and cultures (Glissant, 1997). The trauma experienced by asylum seekers during the legal process, as highlighted in the study by Silverstein et al. (2021), underscores the importance of the right to opacity. The authors note that "applying for legal relief is often traumatic for children," forcing them to repeatedly recount and relive difficult experiences, potentially in a language that is not their own, to strangers who may not fully understand their cultural context or personal circumstances. This traumatic experience of the legal process aligns closely with the concept of the right to opacity. The legal system's demand for "proof" and detailed accounts can be seen as a violation of these children's right to maintain some level of privacy and personal boundaries. It fails to respect the complexity of their situations and the potential cultural differences in how stories are told or trauma is processed.

In light of this, pragmatic "second-best" approaches to asylum policy might include:

- Developing more culturally sensitive methods of gathering necessary information
- Limiting the number of times children must recount traumatic experiences.

- Creating space for narrative forms that may not conform to Western legal expectations.
- Training legal professionals to respect cultural differences and the limits of their understanding of children's experiences.

These approaches, while not perfect, can still yield significant positive impacts. They allow for incremental progress and immediate action, even when systemic overhauls are not feasible in the short term. The pragmatism of pursuing these "second-best" solutions lies in their ability to provide immediate relief, build momentum for more comprehensive reforms, gather data and evidence, maintain stakeholder engagement, and adapt to changing circumstances.

While advocating for ideal solutions remains crucial for long-term progress, the reality of policymaking often requires a balance between aspiration and practicality. By pursuing pragmatic, "second-best" approaches that respect the right to opacity, advocates and policymakers can make meaningful strides in addressing the challenges faced by asylum-seeking children, even in the face of political and resource constraints.

Conclusion

The decision of indigenous Guatemalan youth to undertake the perilous journey of unaccompanied migration to the United States is driven by a complex interplay of structural factors and individual agency. Poverty, limited access to education, and lack of economic opportunities in their home communities create a context of compulsion, propelling these youth to seek better prospects abroad (Heidbrink, 2019). This decision is further compounded by the coercive power of debt, as families increasingly rely on high-interest loans to finance irregular migration, trapping them in cycles of re-migration and financial precarity (Heidbrink, 2019).

The consequences of deportation and forced removal exacerbate the challenges faced by these youth, inflicting what Heidbrink (2022) terms "temporal violence" – disrupting their sense of belonging, curtailing aspirations, and compelling them to confront harsh realities upon return. The stigma, economic hardship, and limited opportunities they encounter in Guatemala are inextricably linked to the broader context of settler colonialism and the marginalization of indigenous communities (Heidbrink, 2022).

While development initiatives like USAID's "Centros Quédate" aim to deter migration by providing job training, they fail to address the root causes stemming from histories of colonialism, imperialism, and economic exploitation (Morris, 2022). Such programs risk perpetuating exploitative labor migration regimes under the guise of development, ignoring the deep-seated structural inequalities that compel young Guatemalans to seek opportunities elsewhere (Morris, 2022).

It's equally important to recognize the agency and resilience of Guatemalan migrants. Many see migration as an opportunity for personal growth, skill development, and economic advancement. As illustrated by the experiences of temporary workers like Arnoldo Chile and Roselia Canel, circular migration can lead to significant personal and community benefits (Carnino, 2024). These migrants often return with enhanced skills, savings, and a broader perspective that can contribute to local development. Furthermore, remittances from migrants represent a substantial portion of Guatemala's GDP, providing vital support to families and communities left behind. The pull factors of higher wages, better working conditions, and opportunities for self-improvement in the United States continue to attract Guatemalan youth seeking to improve their lives and those of their families.

Addressing the factors driving unaccompanied child migration from Guatemala requires a nuanced understanding of the overlapping dimensions of compulsion and choice, as well as the historical and ongoing forms of marginalization experienced by indigenous communities (Heidbrink, 2019; Heidbrink, 2022). Effective policies such as the ones mentioned above must go beyond short-term solutions and confront the systemic issues of poverty, lack of educational access, and the legacy of colonialism that continue to shape the migration experiences of these youth.

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