Triggers to Central American Migration:
A Contemporary Study

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Introduction

In November of 2018, a caravan of approximately 7,000 Central Americans trekked more than 2,500 miles across hostile territory to reach the U.S. Southern Border and file a claim for asylum (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2018). Virtually all caravan members came from the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras – a region characterized by grinding poverty, widespread violence, and governmental instability. Attracting heavy media coverage, this emerging phenomenon of transnational migration drew attention to the growing humanitarian crisis in Central America and at the southern border. Yet despite its recent coverage, Central American migration to the U.S. has been a persistent occurrence since the end of the Cold War. In fact, Department of Homeland Security records illustrate explosive surges occurring much sooner than the appearance of the caravans. Between 2011-2014 alone, the Northern Triangle experienced a 250 percent increase in apprehensions (Department of Homeland Security, 2020). Accordingly, these varying migratory trends put forth a puzzling inquiry leading up the humanitarian crisis of today. Motivated by the current question of migrant caravans, my research will survey the historical motivators of Central American migration patterns while attempting to understand the contemporary developments of the issue. Placing all these components together, my research question will be as follows: *What are the main forces driving contemporary Central American migration patterns?*

Methods

My research design consists of a qualitative approach in which I conduct a case study of Honduras to create an in-depth examination of the independent variables driving migration. The study employs border apprehensions as the main measure of migration with data drawn from the Department of Homeland Security's *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*. Furthermore, the period of observation takes place from 1992-2015.

As for the methodological approach, I rely on process tracing as a deductive means to decipher which of potential triggers have contributed to the surges and to what degree. While this method does not denote causation, it allows for a unique blend of qualitative analysis matched with quantitative data that, together, has put forth a comprehensive and detailed account of the factors conducive to Honduran migration. Critical components of this approach include the uncovering of causal linkages and closely examining the trajectory of change over time.

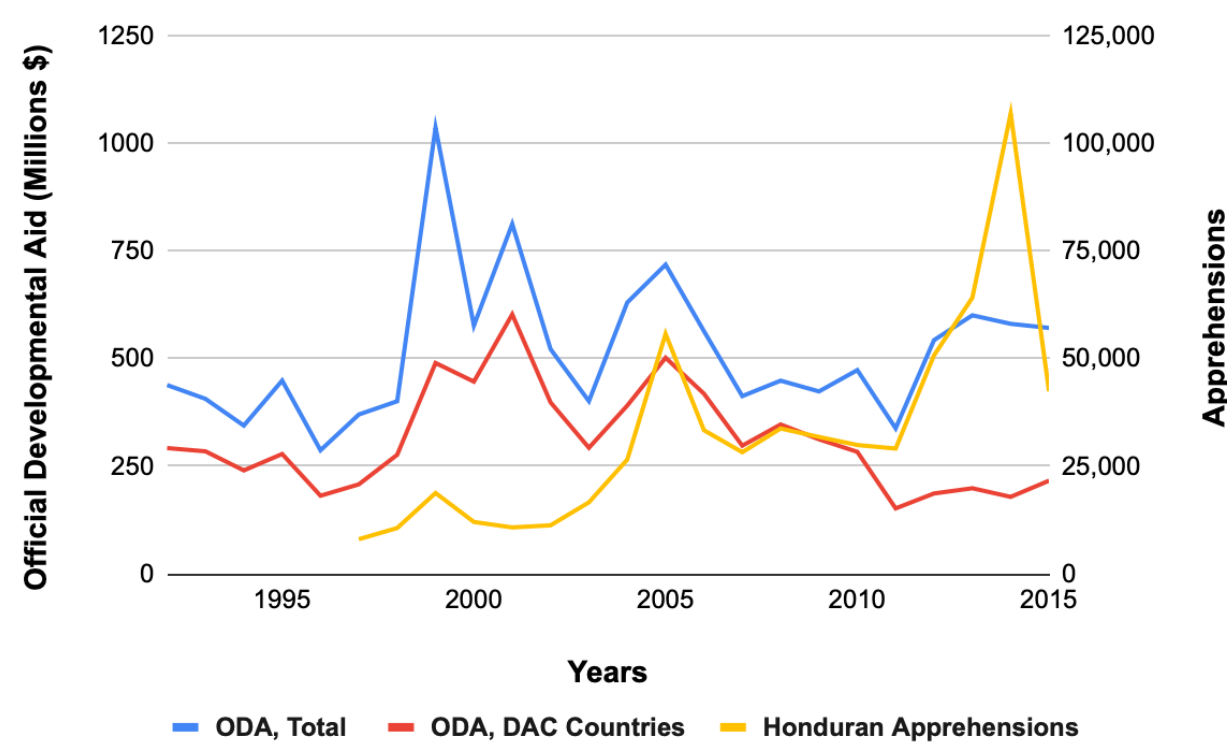Figure 2.1 U.S. Border Apprehensions of Northern Triangle Migrants (1997-2015)
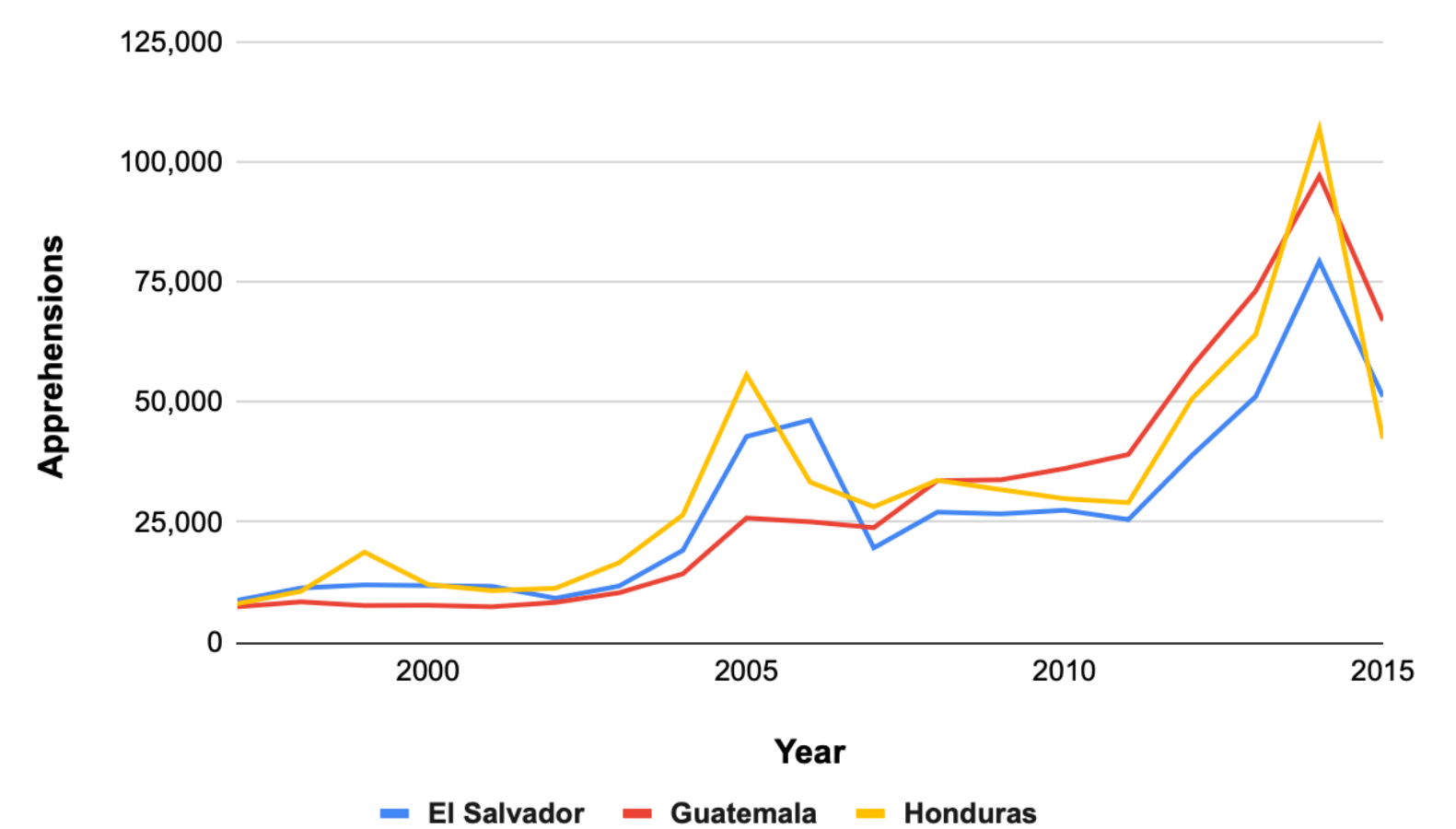
Source: United States, Department of Homeland Security. *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 1992-2015*: [Migrants] *Apprehended by Region and Country of Nationality, Deportable* [Migrants] *Located By Status at Entry and Region and Country of Nationality*

H1 Developmental Aid

H1a: An increase in **developmental aid** to Honduras will result in subsequent developmental effects that will decrease Honduran border apprehensions within a span of three years.
H1b: A decrease in **developmental aid** to Honduras will result in the absence of critical developmental effects that will increase Honduran border apprehensions within a span of three years.

Figure 4.2 Total ODA Disbursements to Honduras Vis-à-vis U.S. Border Apprehensions (1992-2015)


Source: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. "OECD Stat: Aid (ODA) Disbursements to Countries and Regions [DAC2a]." *OECD.Stat*, 2020 and The United States Department of Homeland Security, *Yearbook on Immigration Statistics FY 1992-2015*.

H2 Violence & Insecurity

H2a: An increase in the national **homicide rate** will result in the increase of Honduran border apprehensions within the span of two years.
H2b: A decrease in the national **homicide rate** will result in the decrease of Honduran border apprehensions within the span of two years.

Figure 5.3 Honduran Homicide Rate Vis-à-vis U.S. Border Apprehensions (1992-2015)
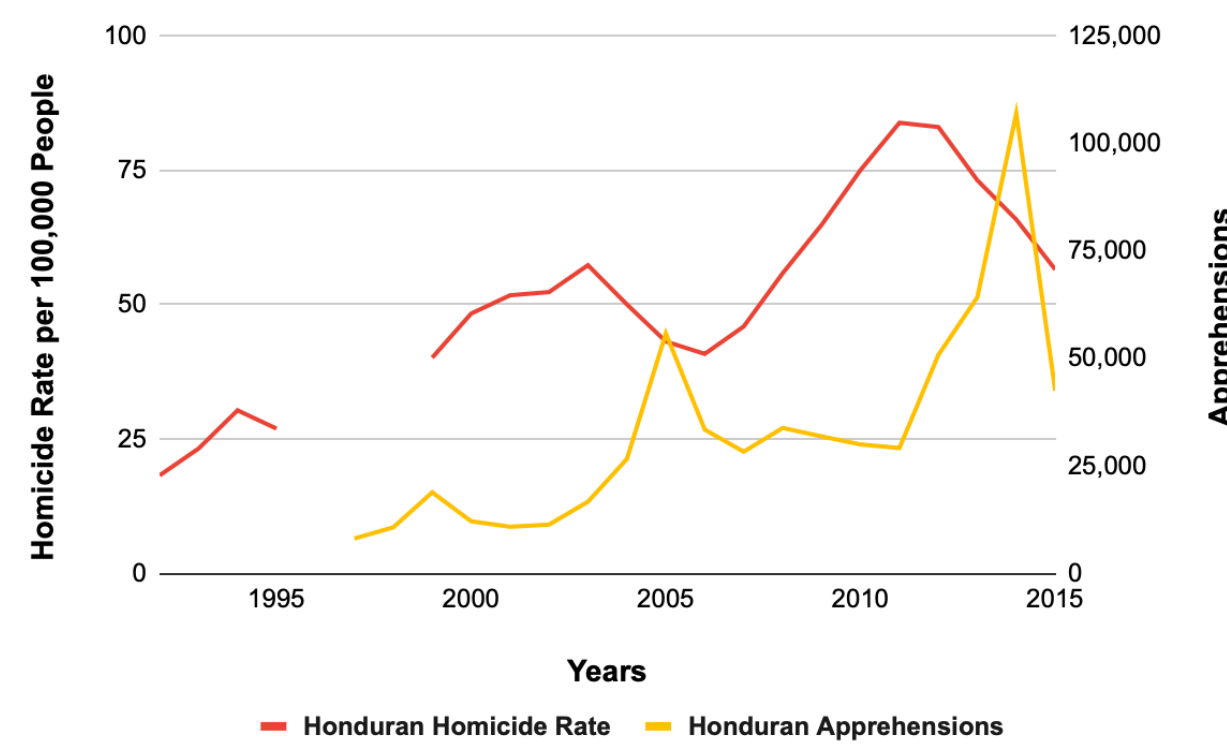
Source: United Nations, UN Office of Drugs and Crime. "International Homicide Statistic Database." *UNODC*, 2020 and The United States Department of Homeland Security, FY 1992-2015.

H3 Climate Change

H3a: The occurrence of an **extreme weather event** will result in an increase in border apprehensions within the span of one year.
H3b: The occurrence of **drought** will result in an increase in border apprehensions within the span of two years.

Figure 6.1 Frequency of Storms and Droughts Over Honduras (1992-2015)
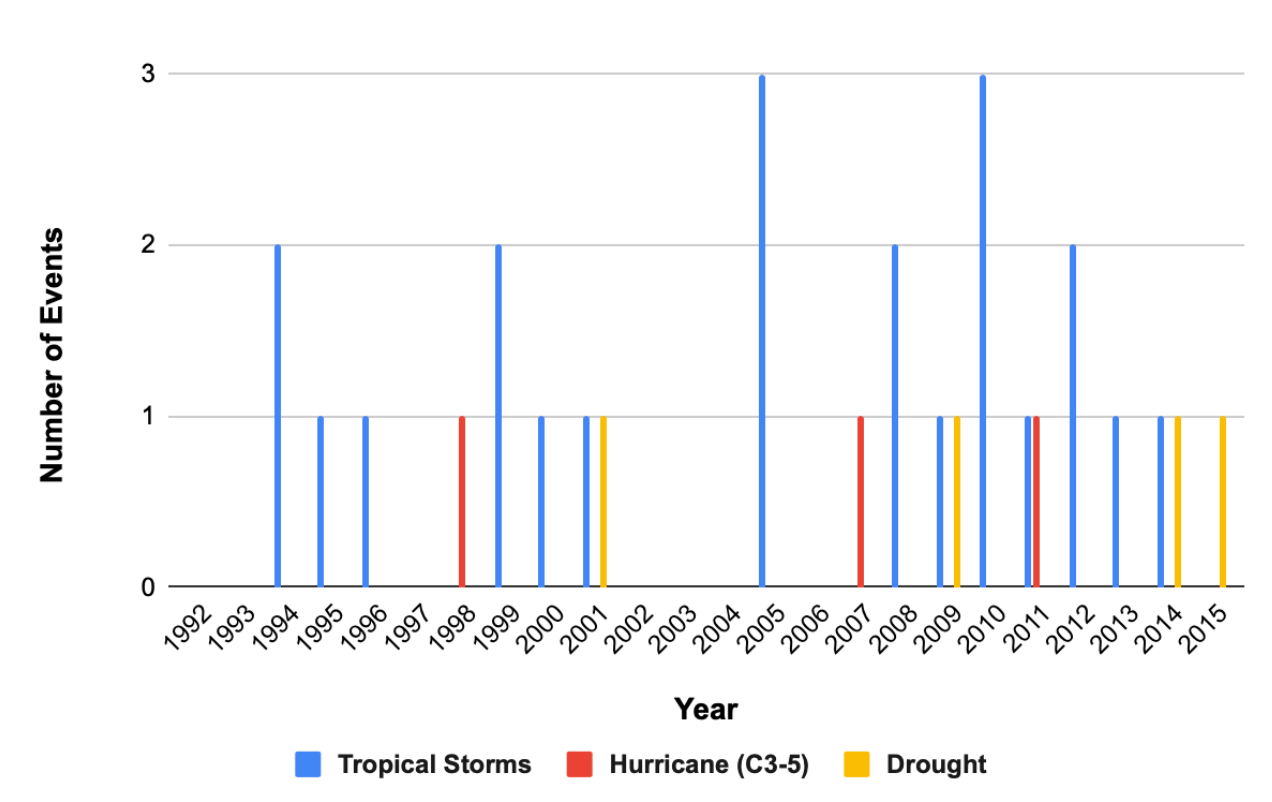
Source: Historical Hurricane Tracks. "Hurricane Data Map," 2020 AND United States, Agency for International Development. "Climate Change Risk Profile: Honduras," March 2017.

Results

The results of the case study are each layered, contributing to a more complete explanation of the puzzle. Though not hypothesized, I first begin with the role of poverty. Dedicating a chapter to this topic, I conclude that poverty – due to its historical presence in Honduras and lack of variability throughout the period observation – is not a driving force of migration. Still, it does serve as a base condition for the surges. Similarly, the developmental aid hypotheses do not show a sufficient correlation with apprehension trends. Upon examining its counterfactual, however, I find that developmental aid does play a crucial role in limiting potential migration flows.

The last two independent variables of the study are both shown to be proximate causes of migration. The violence hypotheses illustrate the strongest relationship with the apprehension data throughout the entire period. However, climate change only begins to drive migration until prolonged drought starts in 2014. Although Honduras is also prone to extreme weather events, these disasters are not shown to be significant contributors of migration surges due to the increase in humanitarian and developmental aid that often follows.

Discussion

Each of the results derived from the case study are highly applicable to the rest of the Northern Triangle region. Not only does each country receive a similar amount of developmental aid but they are also subject to the same pool of criminal organizations and are affected regionally by climate change. Thus, the conclusions derived from my study of Honduras may directly correspond to El Salvador and Guatemala with only few discrepancies.

In application to post-2015 trends, these findings will serve as a strong basis to approach future research. As we continue to experience the emergence of new patterns – such as the migrants caravans that have motivated this study – it may be worth noting the potential waxes and wanes between each impetus over time. One example is the immense cut-off in Northern Triangle aid of approximately 78 percent proposed by the Trump administration (USAID, 2020). Additionally, the chances of prolonged drought and extreme weather events will become more likely as temperatures continue to gradually increase while rainfall decreases (USAID, 2017). Such developments may imply changes in the potency and role of each trigger. Accordingly, their continual observation will inform us a great deal about future migratory trends.

Acknowledgements

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