No Rights, No Dignity: Risks Facing Deported Migrants in Honduras and El Salvador

Editor’s Note: This is the sixth part of a series by Latin America Working Group Education Fund on the intersection of human rights, migration, corruption, and public security in Honduras and El Salvador. You can find the full series at lawg.org/BetweenDangers.

Deportations from the United States to Honduras and El Salvador have not increased in 2017, according to official statistics. But while the overall number of deportees from the United States has not increased, removals of undocumented immigrants from the interior of the country have. [1] This means that this administration is deporting more people from within the United States than last year—largely because there’s been a 40% increase in arrests of undocumented immigrants. Recent U.S. policy threats such as the termination of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), benefiting over 50,000 Honduran and Salvadoran youth and the cancellation after 18 months of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for over 200,000 Salvadorans and potential phase-out for Hondurans in May 2017, could increase deportations to El Salvador and Honduras significantly over the next several years.

What hasn’t changed is the situation to which deported migrants return—one of uncertainty, fear, and little hope for their future outside of a life in hiding. During our trip to both countries in mid-2017, we heard grave concerns regarding how an increase in deportations from the United States could exacerbate the existing security situation, drive forced displacement, and overwhelm the Central American governments’ and civil society’s capacity to protect the rights of and provide basic services to deportees. A lack of programs and job opportunities—combined with threats from gangs, organized crime, and state security forces—leaves returned migrants between a rock and a hard place: they can either turn around and migrate again or resign to living a life without dignity and safety in their home countries.

In this blog, we unpack the ongoing risks and deterioration of conditions that deported migrants face upon their return to El Salvador and Honduras. We evidence the lack of government capacity that exists to receive them and the failure of existing programs to comprehensively and holistically address the issue—and explain the potential impacts of ongoing U.S. policy threats.

Decreased Numbers, Not Decreased Risks for Deported Migrants

Honduras
Approximately 100,000 individuals leave Honduras annually. People depart on a daily basis—100 per day by some estimates. [2] According to Honduran government statistics, as of the end of 2017, a total of 48,022 individuals were deported back to Honduras, including 20,841 from the United States and 26,991 from Mexico. This represents a 30 percent decrease in totals for the same period last year. [3] Over 80 percent of deported migrants from the United States were men. The majority of deported unaccompanied children came from Mexico, while unaccompanied children made up only 1 percent of the migrants deported from the United States.

However, those who serve deported migrants directly predicted that deportations in 2018 might be “massive” given harsh U.S. immigration enforcement policies. [4]

El Salvador
In El Salvador, a country with a much smaller population compared to Honduras, an estimated 300 people leave daily. [5] Through December 2017, deportations to the country also appear to be down in comparison to the same months last year. Official government statistics for 2017 state that 15,691 individuals were
deported from the United States and 11,089 from Mexico. The vast majority of those deported were men. This is a total of 26,780, which represents a 49 percent decrease compared to figures from 2016. Statistics from earlier in 2017 show decreases between the ranges of 20 to 30 percent.

Returning to a Life without Dignity

The situation of insecurity, corruption, and impunity that all deported migrants return to remains the same and in some cases has deteriorated. In the worst cases, an individual may face direct threats to their life or be assassinated shortly after returning. In the best cases, returning often means a life in hiding and facing daily challenges alone, including possible trauma from the journey and rights violations suffered at the hands of organized crime, authorities, and immigrant enforcement agents. The process by which individuals are deported back to Honduras or El Salvador from the United States involves ICE-chartered flights that depart from different cities in the United States and on which individuals often spend hours handcuffed. Upon arrival to their home country, migrants are received at repatriation centers, usually run by a combination of religious orders, NGOs, international organizations, and the government. The attention that they offered is limited to receiving water and snacks, a cursory medical checkup, perhaps some financial support to return to their home communities, and an intake interview to document their arrival to the country.

After that, deported migrants are usually on their own—a reflection of how governments view their arrival, welcoming them in nice-looking buildings and registering them as statistics, but failing to recognize their rights, urgent needs, and potential to contribute to society.

The repatriation centers—such as the Centro de Atención al Migrante Retornado (CAMR) in San Pedro Sula, Omoa, and El Edén, Honduras and the Dirección de Atención al Migrante, or La Chacra center in San Salvador, El Salvador—are key in providing the basic services migrants often need upon arrival. However, these centers often lack the capacity to identify the broader protection needs migrants might have and often do not provide or coordinate for longer-term reintegration support with other agencies.

Most migrants are out of the center in about an hour and then face the difficult situation of figuring out what to do. “People go outside of the centers onto the streets and usually decide to leave again,” a Salvadoran government official told us.

Facing Risks & Trauma Upon Return

In many cases, the fears migrants have of returning to their communities are the same ones that propelled them to leave in the first place, including threats from gangs and organized crime. These risks are heightened for unaccompanied children, women, youth, and LGBTI individuals. Deported migrants may be targeted for various reasons: they may have already been under threat before they left, the gang control in the community may have worsened, or perhaps they may be perceived as returning from the United States with money and become immediate targets for extortion.

Fear may also be compounded with other stigmas upon return to the community. Deported migrants might experience feelings of failure and disappointment at the way things turned out and rejection by family members. Stigmas can be greater for deported women, especially because they might suffer sexual and gender-based violence along the migration journey.

In some cases, deported migrants may fear the situation so much that they may not want to return to their home communities at all. Some NGOs report that they have witnessed cases where children don’t want to leave the repatriation centers due to fear. In a recent report by the Center for Migration Studies and Cristosal
Foundation, half of the people interviewed were displaced internally before deciding to leave the country, and when they returned, these individuals again depended on family so as not to return to the community from which they fled. [11] Thus, upon deportation to their home country, they also return to the very situation of displacement, uncertainty, and fear they fled from in the first place.

In instances where deported migrants do return to their communities, many resign to living in states of confinement and being locked up in their own homes to avoid threats, suffering restrictions on their personal freedoms. [12] Individuals at risk often turn to their families for protection instead of the state, and those without families, such as unaccompanied children or youth, are often at most risk. Staff from a Salvadoran NGO told us that young men are not on the government’s protection agenda and that, when the former don’t find protection with the state, they seek it with gang members. [13]

An Uncertain Future: Reintegration to What?
Deported migrants face a myriad of challenges in attempting to live a normal life in El Salvador and Honduras.

Many deported migrants return with minimal to no financial resources or personal identification documents. This could be, in part, because they were displaced prior to fleeing, they utilized all of their resources to migrate, they borrowed money from family and succumbed to debt, or they were robbed somewhere along the way. Some may receive a provisional identification document upon their return at the repatriation centers, but the process to get new identification documents can take months. Not having official identification documents means that individuals may face obstacles in accessing basic services and in seeking employment. [14]

For deported children, returning to school in their home communities or in areas where they were displaced is difficult. They may face many of the bureaucratic hurdles confronting internally displaced persons (IDP) in transferring schools. [15] These problems can be exacerbated by the children’s lack of paperwork and gaps in schooling—anywhere from a few months to several years of absenteeism, depending on how long they were out of the country. They may also be bullied and stigmatized by their peers for returning after having fled.

Several local organizations also consistently raised concerns over the lack of psychological support available for deportees to help them process the feelings they may have upon returning and any trauma they may have suffered along the journey.

Finally, access to sustainable and well-paid employment opportunities for deported migrants are few and far between. “One cannot speak of reinsertion into the community because there are no public policies that help decrease the risks that forced migrants to leave, much less programs aimed at honing individual’s skills and ability to obtain an income that allows them to live with dignity,” a 2016 Casa Alianza report stated regarding the situation in Honduras. [16]

Often, there is stigma associated with hiring deported migrants. Employers often see returned migrants as criminals and disregard the skills they might bring based on their work experience in the United States. Companies are sometimes not willing to take a chance on deportees, especially if they lack the right paperwork or cannot demonstrate past work experience in the country. [17]

The Salvadoran government has attempted to increase employment opportunities and reintegration services for returned migrants through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Migration programs, but they have largely been limited in scope and reach. [18]
Lack of employment opportunities drives deported migrants into the informal economy and further into a vicious cycle of poverty and instability.

**Lack of Government Capacity to Receive Deported Migrants**

**Empty Legal Frameworks**
El Salvador and Honduras recently established legal frameworks to coordinate government agencies’ responses and resources for the deported migrant population—the Ley de Protección de los Hondureños Migrantes y sus Familiares in Honduras and the Ley Especial para la Protección y Desarrollo de la Persona Migrante y su Familia in El Salvador. [19] However, these frameworks lack sufficient funding to establish programs, including those that provide longer-term attention to deported migrants.

**Ineffective Programs, No Comprehensive Policies**
What these laws did create is an alphabet soup of a few, small government programs meant to support deported migrants but no actual, comprehensive policies that holistically address the issue. In El Salvador and Honduras, initiatives to follow-up with deported migrants once they have left repatriation centers are run by a very limited number of international organizations, churches, and local NGOs.

Often institutional support is missing from the beginning of the process, at the repatriation centers where they should be providing attention and services to deported migrants leaving the centers, such as unaccompanied children or women. Yet, they fail to do so. In El Salvador for example, child welfare agencies, such as the Instituto Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Niñez y Adolescente (National Institute for Child and Adolescent Development or ISNA) and the Consejo Nacional de la Niñez y Adolescencia (National Council for Children and Adolescents or CONNA), should coordinate a response that considers an unaccompanied child’s best interests, including protection, foster care, and psychological services. In Honduras, the same responsibility would fall on the child protection agency, Dirección de Niñez, Adolescencia y Familia (DINAF). However, there is widespread recognition that these agencies alone cannot attend to deported children, and their services are usually limited to handing over deported children to family members. [20]

Of the deported migrants interviewed in a recent report published by Cristosal and the Center for Migration Studies, all highlighted that they were living without institutional support upon return to El Salvador and Honduras. [21]

Local nonprofits and churches often have difficulty accessing repatriation centers or coordinating with the government agencies that run them, specifically in obtaining contact information of deported individuals so that they can provide support and follow-up services in their local communities. In general, individuals are also not screened for protection needs or concerns at the repatriation centers, although the Norwegian Refugee Council has been doing so for the past year in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, albeit on a small scale. [22] In El Salvador, CONNA was collaborating with other government agencies to provide a new, additional interview to better identify the protection needs of unaccompanied children upon their return to La Chacra after deportation. [23]

Beyond the repatriation centers, the programs that do exist are extremely limited in design. They usually involve small centers in major cities or municipal capitals where migrants should already be able to register and access support and service information. For example in Honduras, we heard of new, one-stop shop centers called the Unidades Municipales de Atención a Migrantes Retornados (UMAR) (Municipal Units for the care of returned migrants). These were emerging in at least San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa in 2017. [24] Conceptually, these centers should provide deported migrants information on how to access services upon
their return. According to UNHCR staff in Honduras, however, these persons with protection needs go to these centers only to turn right back around to seek help from international organizations such as the UNHCR, or simply to migrate again. [25]

In El Salvador, we heard of new municipal centers to serve children and families in need of protection, including but not solely focusing on deported migrants, called CANAFs (Centro de Atención a Niños y Familias) and the broader local offices to assist victims, OLAVs (Oficina Local de Asistencia a Víctimas). Yet, from our conversations with UNHCR, deported populations face particular risks and should, therefore, receive specific recognition in addition to inclusion as part broad initiatives that respond to victims. [26]

Deported migrants are unique because, upon repatriation, they will not stay in the larger cities or municipal capitals, make themselves known by registering in such centers, or go to them alone as unaccompanied children. “They avoid registering. You can’t find them because they don’t want to be found,” a representative from an NGO in El Salvador told us. Churches that try to assist and follow-up with some migrants often face difficulties due to inability to locate migrants remaining in hiding. [27]

U.S. Policy Threats

During our trip, we consistently heard that increased deportations would overwhelm the existing, ineffective systems in place to receive them, as well as state and civil society capacity.

The termination of programs such as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), of which over 50,000 are Honduran and Salvadoran youth, the recent termination after 18 months of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for over 200,000 Salvadorans, and the potential phase-out of the same program for Hondurans in May 2017 could significantly increase deportations over the next several years. Such terminations would force the return of individuals and families that have not been in their home countries in over fifteen years. These people—with limited family protection networks, knowledge of the current environment, and for some, even Spanish—would be especially vulnerable to gangs and organized crime. They would be likely targeted for extortion by criminals, who believe they have access to resources in the United States. [28]

Increases in operations to arrest undocumented immigrants in the United States with gang affiliations could also lead to the return of gang members to El Salvador and Honduras, potentially exacerbating high levels of violence in both countries, or even repeating a pattern from the 1990s when a massive wave of deportations of gang members from the United States to unstable contexts in both countries set off the levels of instability and violence that have plagued both countries in recent years.

This year, El Salvador passed a new law that aims to better register and track deported individuals with criminal backgrounds. [29] The law gives local police authority to monitor those that fulfill certain criteria, like having a criminal background, visiting places frequented by gang members, or carrying out intimidating acts in public spaces. [30] In certain cases, the law could require individuals to check in with local police in the weeks after their return and even to appear before a judge.

While information-sharing between the United States and El Salvador on individuals with dangerous backgrounds could be indeed useful, if applied without caution, this approach could also criminalize deported migrants without serious criminal backgrounds, particularly young men and unaccompanied children, and expose them to greater harm. Violence prevention approaches should focus on trust-building with communities, coordination between government agencies to provide protection to deported individuals, and facilitation of employment opportunities that will not expose individuals further to extortion or threats.

To date, U.S. support to the governments of El Salvador and Honduras appears limited to providing assistance
through the International Organization for Migration (IOM) that goes towards improving the infrastructure of the repatriation centers and supporting local level centers that provide services to deported migrants in the major cities and capitals. However, responses to deported migrants should be well-funded and comprehensive, moving beyond just repatriation centers. Efforts to identify the protection needs of deported individuals upon arrival should be scaled up. Coordination should be improved between the government agencies running the repatriation centers and international humanitarian organizations, NGOs, and churches to allow follow-up with deported individuals and their families in their home communities, should they desire it. Newly established local level centers meant to provide information to deported migrants should consider risk analyses based on location and modes of operating. Lastly, all programs should focus on the specific reintegration needs of unaccompanied children, women, and LGBTI individuals.

The United States and Mexico should be held accountable for returning individuals with protection concerns back to situations of risk. All of these constitute practices of non-refoulement, or a violation of the right not to be returned to danger or persecution under international law. And this applies to cases of individuals living in hiding and without dignity, not just those cases in which deported migrants are assassinated. The focus should be protecting the rights of migrants and refugees, including ensuring the protection and rights of all those who are returned.


[16] Casa Alianza Honduras, Pastoral de Movilidad Humana, and Catholic Relief Services, Niñas y niños, 45.


[21] Center for Migration Studies and Cristosal, Point of No Return, 6.


