

Migrants walk through the Sonoran Desert in Arizona after illegally crossing the border.



Honduran migrants travel through Guatemala toward the United States.

DESPERATE

Fleeing poverty and violence, Central Americans are risking everything to get to

Migrants cross the Suchiate River between Guatemala and Mexico.





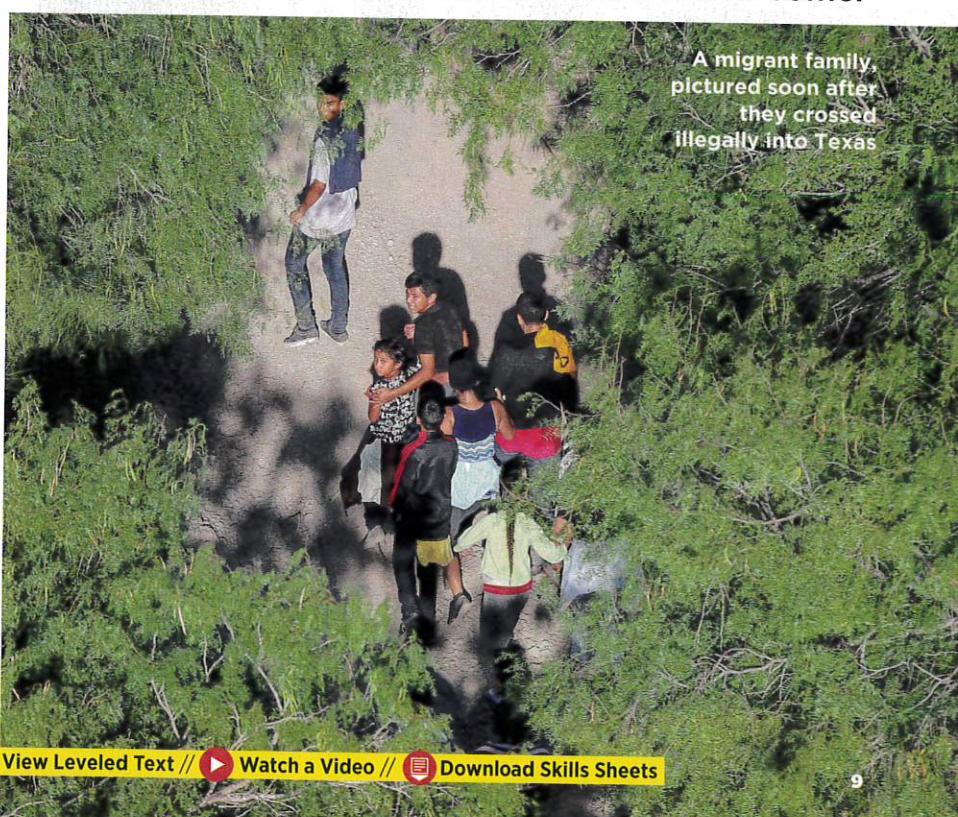
A boy and his father (not pictured) seeking asylum are stopped by the U.S. Border Patrol in Texas.

JOURNEYS

the U.S. Now American officials are increasing efforts to warn them not to come.



Migrants sleep in a gym in Guatemala during their journey north.



A migrant family, pictured soon after they crossed illegally into Texas

LAST SPRING, Mr. Juárez* packed a small bag, hugged his three children, and said goodbye to his family. Then he set out on the more than 1,200-mile trek from his home in the Central American country of Guatemala to the southwestern border of the United States. He was aware of the journey's risks: from crossing brutally hot deserts filled with rattlesnakes to being kidnapped by criminals. After all, it was his sixth attempt to try to cross the border illegally to find work.

As Juárez saw it, he had no other choice. His business had failed and he was deep in debt. There seemed little chance of his finding work in Guatemala. So he and his wife had borrowed the equivalent of nearly \$13,000 from a friend to pay a smuggler to get him to the U.S.

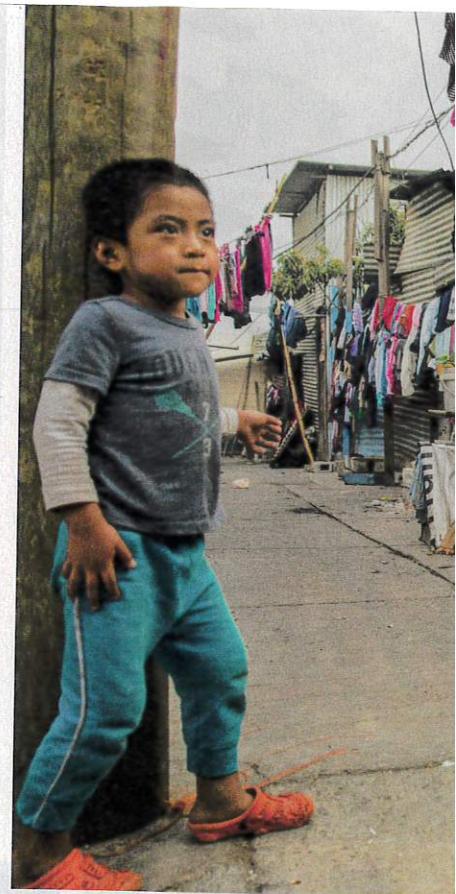
Juárez is part of a recent surge of people who have left Central America in search of a better life in the U.S. Like so many others, he

ignored stern warnings from the U.S. government—most recently in the form of billboards and radio and TV ads—against making the dangerous journey.

In the past year, more than 100,000 families from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador have been arrested or stopped at the U.S.-Mexico border. The number of Guatemalan and Honduran families picked up at the border has more than doubled in the past two years. Meanwhile, it's unknown how many **migrants** from those countries have made it into the U.S. without being caught.

Trapped by Poverty

People from around the world try to come to the U.S. for many reasons. Some are fleeing violence or **persecution** in their home countries. Some are students who come to attend college. Some, like Juárez and so many other residents of Guatemala's mountainous

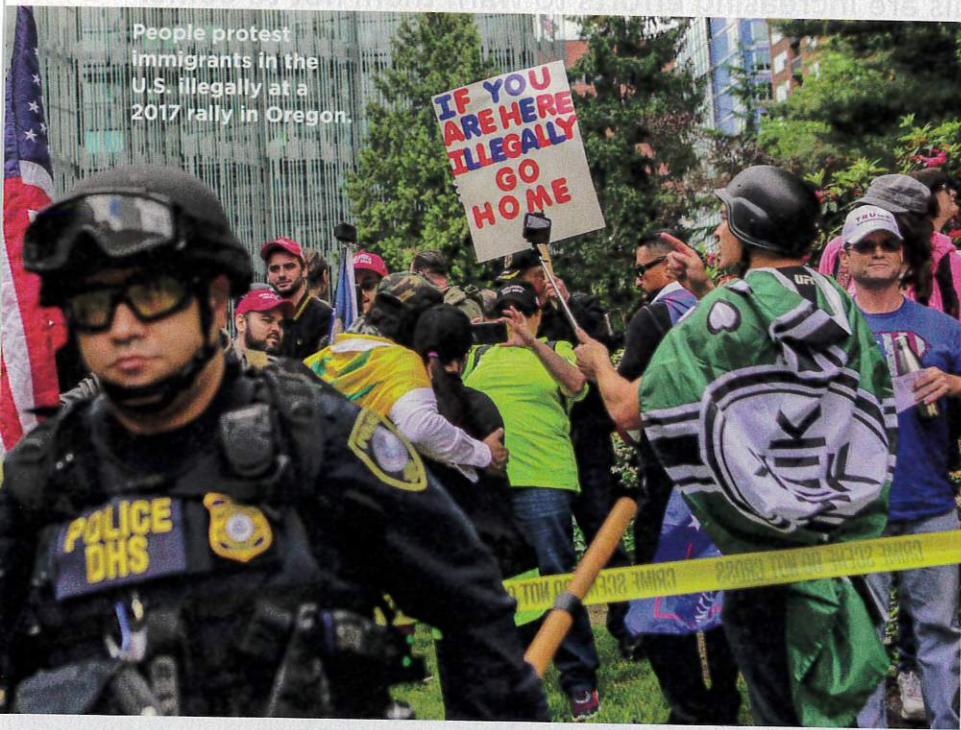


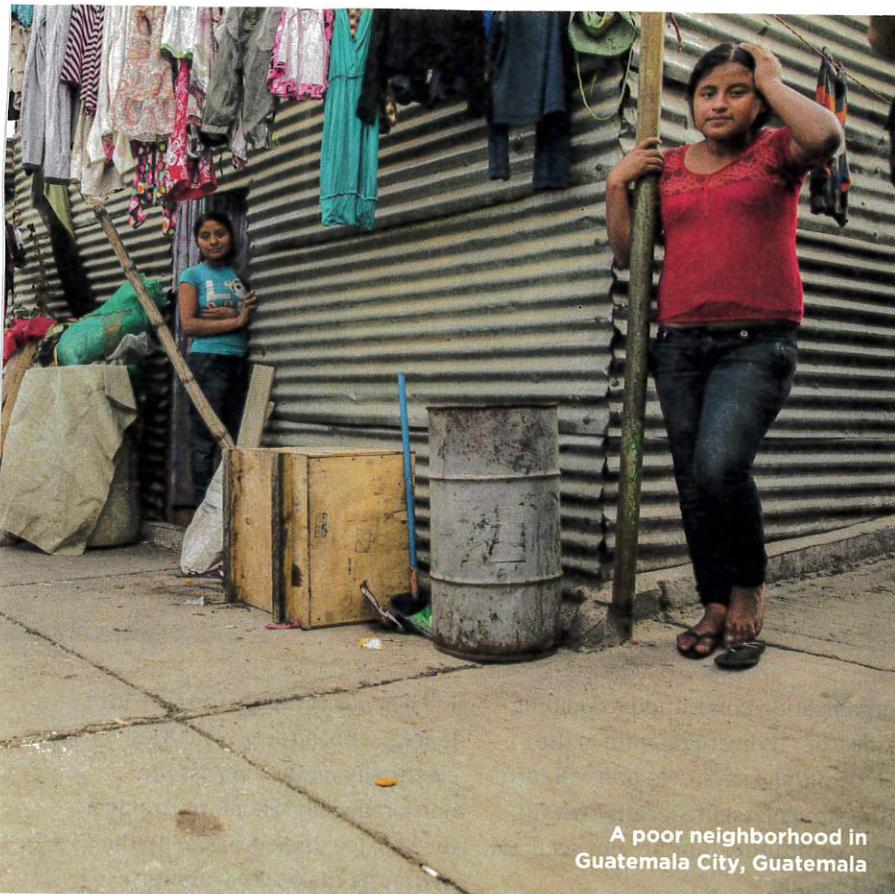
western highlands, wish to escape crushing poverty and find work.

Indeed, extreme hardship is all most people in the area have ever known. More than 75 percent of the region's population is poor. Many earn little to nothing for the coffee, corn, beans, and other agricultural products they grow, and small farmers are unable to pay their bills. Nearly 70 percent of children under age 5 suffer from chronic malnutrition.

In the face of severe poverty, as well as **corruption** in local governments and the threat of gang violence, many Guatemalans choose to leave. Some of them turn to smugglers, who promise to illegally transport them safely across the U.S. border—for a price.

"We have to create better opportunities for people so they can stay," says Víctor Manuel Asturias Cordón. He leads a Guatemalan government agency that seeks to reduce high rates of





A poor neighborhood in
Guatemala City, Guatemala

The U.S. plans to spend more than \$200 million on projects to reduce poverty and create jobs in Guatemala.

poverty by promoting small businesses.

"We also have to work on countering smugglers, who have convinced people that their best opportunities to be successful lie in the States," he adds.

Warnings From the U.S.

Americans are divided in their response to individuals who come to the U.S. illegally. Some people think that certain undocumented immigrants living here should be given a path to citizenship. They say these immigrants contribute to the economy and often take low-paying jobs that few Americans want. But other people, including President Donald Trump, say that people living in the U.S. illegally drain the country's resources.

The Trump administration is alarmed by the stream of people coming from Guatemala—as well as Honduras and El Salvador. This has U.S. officials looking for ways to stop the flow of migrants.

For starters, the government has launched a \$1.3 million advertising campaign to warn people about the dangers of making the journey north. In Guatemala, billboards, as well as radio and TV commercials, urge people not to make the trip.

The U.S. government also plans to spend more than \$200 million on projects in Guatemala's highlands to create jobs and reduce poverty, officials say.

In addition, the Trump administration has tried to discourage illegal immigration by cracking down on border



Why Come to the U.S. Illegally?

About one in seven people living in the U.S. were born in another country. Many of those immigrants came here legally. Others are undocumented.

A person can legally move to the U.S. in a number of ways. For example, he or she may travel here on a work or student **visa**. Or he or she may be sponsored by a close relative who is a U.S. citizen and receive a **green card**. A person may also arrive at the border and apply for **asylum**.

Why do people come here illegally? For one thing, the process to legally enter the U.S. can take years. In many cases, people are desperate for work or feel their safety is threatened in their home country—or both. They may not have relatives in the U.S. who can sponsor them or the right combination of skills and education needed to get a work visa. Meanwhile, applying for asylum is a long, difficult process—and it is granted to just a small fraction of those who seek it. Because of these and other challenges to legal immigration, many people cross the U.S. border illegally instead.

crossings. Earlier this year, that included separating migrant children from their families when they were detained. But Trump ended that practice after widespread protest from the public and some lawmakers.

How Smugglers Advertise

Still, the longing for a better life in the U.S. remains strong for many Central Americans. In Guatemala, that desire is fueled by a separate—and more powerful—advertising campaign run by the smugglers. Residents say they see daily ads by smugglers, known locally as “coyotes,” promising to get them to the U.S. On at least one radio station, smugglers offer to transport migrants north. Some even promote their services on Facebook.

Migrants are offered different types of trips, based on how much

“We know about the risk, and we know how hard [the journey to the U.S.] is. But we still want to go.”

they can pay. They’re often guaranteed three chances to cross the border. The smugglers’ ads feature pictures of large, modern buses. But those images are a far cry from the punishing reality of the long journey north. People who pay smugglers usually end up traveling on crowded flatbed trucks or on foot.

At the urging of U.S. officials, the Guatemalan government has begun offering rewards to people who turn in smugglers. Still, few do so.

“Everyone knows who [the smugglers] are,” says Dora Alonzo. She runs a Guatemalan



organization committed to keeping kids from trying to migrate to the U.S. Still, she says, “No one will turn [the smugglers] in, because within the community they are not seen as bad people.”

Change Uncertain

Will more Central Americans listen to the U.S. government’s warnings and stay home? It’s too early to tell

That was certainly the case for Juárez, who, after several tries, eventually made it across the border illegally. He plans to stay in the U.S. for three years. With the money he makes as a laborer, Juárez and his wife hope to pay off their debt and eventually open another business in Guatemala.

The journey’s dangers also seem worth it to a 20-year-old Guatemalan who identified herself only as Onelia. She has tried to cross the border into Texas at least three times. On each attempt, she was caught and sent back home.

Onelia now works at an organization dedicated to keeping residents in Guatemala by providing them with job opportunities.

Although she earns a decent salary and enjoys her job, she says she plans to set off again soon for the U.S.

“We know about the risk, and we know how hard it is,” she says. “But we still want to go.” ♦

With reporting by *The New York Times*

whether the new messaging campaign is working, says Kevin K. McAleenan of U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

“We have to give it some time to see whether it’s effective in reaching that audience,” he explains.

Even if people in Central America see the new ads, there’s no guarantee that the campaign will convince people not to make the journey to the U.S. For many families, the promise of a better life in America makes the risks of the long trip worth it.

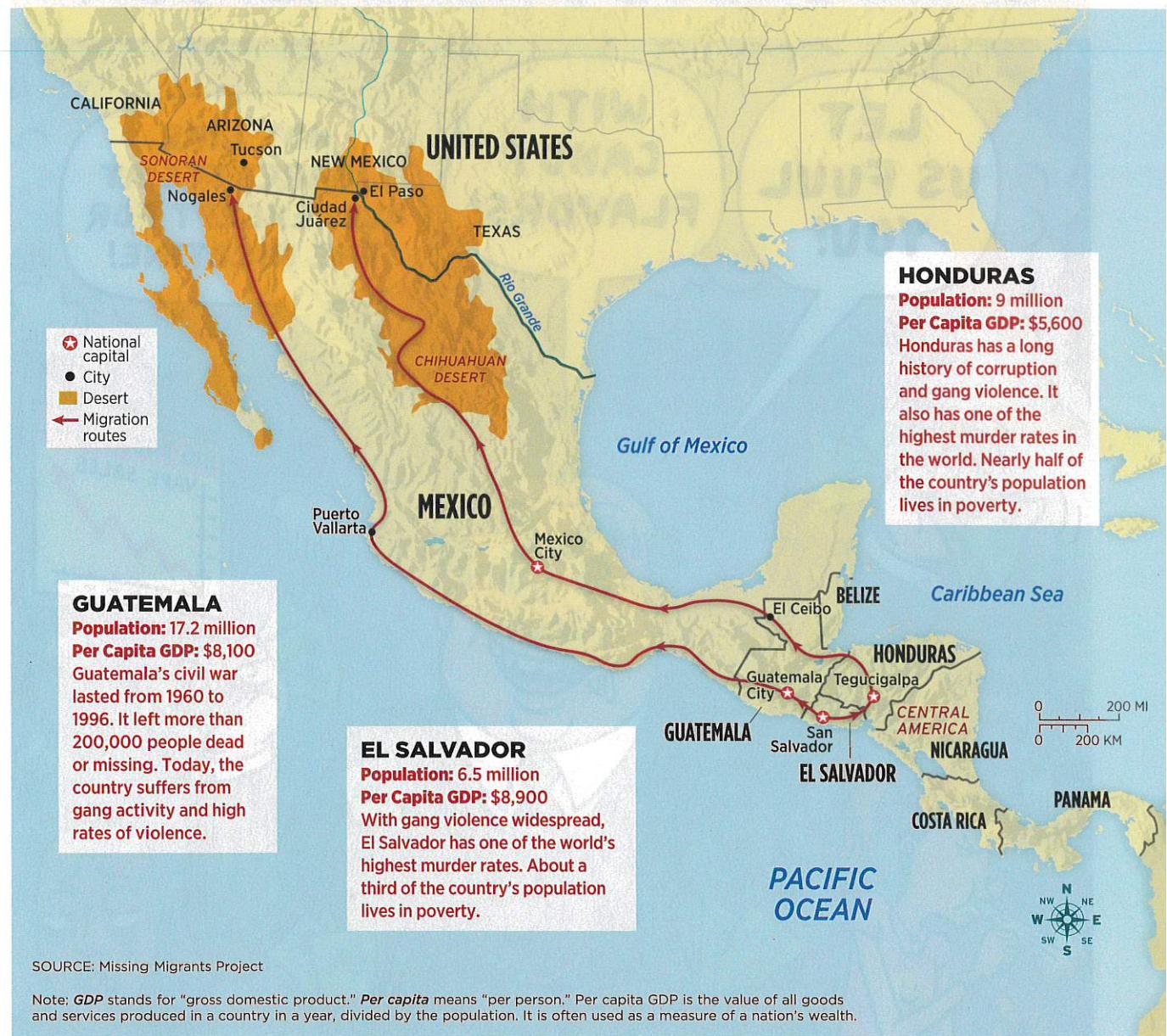
COMING SOON
More stories about immigration in the U.S.



WRITE ABOUT IT!
Why are so many people from Central America trying to make it to the U.S.? Cite text evidence.

Fleeing Central America

In the past year, thousands of people from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador have attempted the trip to the U.S. Here are two common routes.



SOURCE: Missing Migrants Project

Note: *GDP* stands for "gross domestic product." *Per capita* means "per person." Per capita GDP is the value of all goods and services produced in a country in a year, divided by the population. It is often used as a measure of a nation's wealth.

Map Skills

1. What is the capital of Guatemala?
2. What forms Mexico's border with Texas?
3. In which country labeled on the map do nearly half of all residents live in poverty?
4. Which countries border Nicaragua?
5. What is the per capita GDP of El Salvador?
6. In which direction would you travel to get from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, to Tucson, Arizona?
7. According to the map, two major migration routes originate in which city?
8. What body of water is located directly north of Honduras?
9. For how many years did Guatemala's civil war last?
10. Migrants from El Ceibo, Guatemala, would have to travel about how many straight-line miles to reach the capital of Mexico?