

Guatemalan Army members patrolling a street of downtown Guatemala City, classified as one of the most dangerous cities in the world. © UNHCR/Daniele Volpe, May 2016



CAUSE OR CONSEQUENCE?

Reframing violence and displacement in Guatemala

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Displacement has a long and distinctive history in Guatemala. The country's civil war, which lasted from 1960 until 1996, left between 500,000 and 1.5 million people internally displaced, many in the shanty towns of the capital Guatemala City. Most of those who fled their homes and land were indigenous people fleeing threats to their lives and wellbeing.¹

Violence and displacement have continued despite the country's post-civil war period of political stabilisation and the establishment of a democratic process. Addressing internal displacement comprehensively and achieving durable solutions, however, is challenging. The phenomenon is not systematically documented and the government is still to officially recognise it, let alone collect data on it. IDMC's 2018 Global Report on Internal Displacement estimates that there were 242,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) in Guatemala as of the end of 2017, but the figure is based on severely outdated data that has not been updated since 1997.² It also documented 1,200 new displacements of people evicted by the government during 2017, as well as 45,000 new disaster displacements.³

This lack of information helps to fuel a popular misconception that people from Central America who cross the border toward the US find it a simple and easy way to access "the American dream" on the other side of the Rio Grande, and are eagerly awaiting their chance to move. Patterns of population movement within Guatemala suggest the opposite. People generally prefer to remain in their home communities and make substantial efforts to mitigate factors such as violence in an effort to avoid having to leave. Displacement brings many challenges, including increased vulnerability to violence caused by the loss of social networks and structures.

REFRAMING DISPLACEMENT CAUSED BY VIOLENCE

This study seeks to reframe internal displacement associated with crime and violence in an effort to establish a shared understanding of the phenomenon in Guatemala and the broader Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA). It is based on field research in Guatemala and an extensive

desk review of relevant literature, both undertaken between February and May 2018.

The research concludes that most displacement associated with direct violence is either caused by state agents' use of force against whole communities, in forced evictions for development projects for example, or by threats of violence from gangs and organised crime groups. Other cases include domestic violence and community threats and violence such as lynchings. People from minorities such as indigenous groups and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, who face discrimination, may also be displaced.

In addition to categorising these triggers of displacement, the study also examines the effects of underlying economic, political, social and environmental drivers: how current and past politics and policies fuel the phenomena, the role of organised crime groups and gangs, and the impacts of targeted and general criminal violence. It concludes that most current population movements within Guatemala are the result not of direct forms of violence, but rather of "structural violence," a term used to describe social mechanisms, state institutions and cultural norms or practices that prevent people from meeting their basic needs.

This latter type of movement tends to be categorised as voluntary migration, but this study argues that drawing a distinction between migration and displacement is artificial because the lines between the two phenomena are often blurred. They are perhaps best viewed as lying at two ends of a continuum with predominantly forced movement at one end and predominantly voluntary movement at the other.⁴ Any movement, be it largely voluntary or forced, is also influenced by subjective views of a situation, a personal threshold for risk, and access to information.⁵ With this in mind, the term "displacement" is used in this study to describe movements undertaken by individuals or groups who felt obliged to leave their homes either because of direct violence or structural violence.

The link between violence and displacement does not end when people move. Guatemalans often leave areas where they experienced structural violence only to encounter direct and further structural violence in their new locations. If no clear efforts are made to support communities in their home areas, reduce internal displacement and prevent it happening in the future, continuing rapid and unplanned urbanisation is likely to lead to ever growing challenges in urban areas, including increasing levels of violence.

A BASELINE FOR ACTION: UNDERSTANDING AND ESTIMATING DISPLACEMENT

This research presents four key findings against the backdrop of the principle of national sovereignty as responsibility. These findings offer new insight into the phenomenon of internal displacement in the country as a basis for developing protection and assistance interventions, guiding government and civil society responses, and informing policy recommendations.

| KEY FINDING 1: STRUCTURAL AND DIRECT VIOLENCE BOTH FORCE PEOPLE TO MOVE

Structural rather than direct violence appears to be the main cause of displacement in Guatemala. Internal movement rarely results in sustained safety and stability, however, and many IDPs "jump from the frying pan into the fire". In trying to escape structural violence they find themselves living in conditions that are little better and often worse, with the added threat of direct violence and secondary displacement.

Direct violence does play a role in displacement, though the number of people affected in this way is unclear. Extortion leads to displacement in some cases, most often when there are no alternatives. People living in vulnerable areas tend to employ other strategies first, such as choosing not to start or expand their businesses, or to close them down, in an effort to avoid attracting the attention of those demanding protection money.

| KEY FINDING 2: DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS AND DISASTERS ARE SIGNIFICANT DRIVERS OF DISPLACEMENT

The Guatemalan government is actively involved in displacing communities. Land disputes are often tied to the removal of people from protected areas or to make way for development projects. Such evictions tend not to be accompanied by a support plan to safeguard the livelihoods of those affected, which often results in onward movements as people trickle away from their relocation areas.

Sudden-onset disasters such as tropical storms and slow-onset phenomena such as drought and other climate change impacts also displace whole communities at a time. In the absence of a comprehensive government response, those forced to flee because their homes are no longer habitable may have to move again when they find they are unable to meet their basic needs.

| KEY FINDING 3: DISPLACEMENT, CRIME AND VIOLENCE COMBINE TO CREATE A DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Displacement often tears families apart and leaves children and young people unsupported, making them more likely to become involved in gang activity. The disruption of education, weakened family structures and lack of income-generating opportunities inherent in displacement means many of those affected resort to crime to make ends meet.

This dynamic in tandem with rapid urbanisation is expected to have serious long-term impacts for Guatemala. Prospects are bleak because young people become trapped in violence and criminality rather than contributing to the country's growth. It would be a mistake to assume that all those involved in criminal activity are violent opportunists who prey on the vulnerable in society. Many see it as their only chance for survival or stability.

KEY FINDING 4: SOMETIMES DISPLACEMENT IS THE BEST OPTION, BUT STILL UNAVAILABLE TO MANY

Displacement tends to have negative outcomes such as overcrowded urban areas with limited resources and little support. In some cases, however, such as those involving direct or domestic violence, movement may be a better option and should be facilitated. Many survivors, most often women, tend to be unable to escape victimisation because they lack the means to move. Guatemala has legislation against domestic violence, but it remains commonplace and few services are available to those affected.⁶ Given the country's weak police and justice systems, the same can be said of support for members of the LGBT community and those who fear lynchings.

Overall, the nature and magnitude of the challenges posed by displacement need to be better understood in order to ensure that mitigation efforts are appropriately targeted. The current dynamics in Guatemala should be understood as survival and coping strategies inextricably linked to limited opportunities as well as direct violence. Instead of focusing on policing and security services as the main and often only response to violence, considerable efforts should be made to provide viable alternatives that help low-income populations in urban areas to meet their basic needs.

NOTES

1. IDMC, "Global overview 2011: People internally displaced by conflict and violence" available at <https://goo.gl/CQzx2T>.
2. IDMC, "2018 Global Report on Internal Displacement (GRID 2018)", available at <https://goo.gl/AV1TdM>.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Erdal, Marta Bivand and Ceri Oeppen (2018) Forced to leave? The discursive and analytical significance of describing migration as forced and voluntary, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44:6, 981-998.
5. See also: Turton, D. 2013. Conceptualizing Forced Migration. Working paper No 12. Queen Elisabeth House: Oxford.
6. The Comprehensive Support Centre(s) for Women Survivors of Violence (CAIMUS) provide psychological and legal support and emergency housing, and they are among the few support mechanisms available to survivors of domestic violence. CAIMUS can only be found in 10 departments (Guatemala, Escuintla, Rabinal, Suchitepéquez, Petén, San Juan Sacatepéquez, Chiquimula, Chimaltenango and Sololá) of the total of 22 departments that make up the country.



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