

## Poverty Relief in “El Norte”: The Migration Channel of Guatemala to the United States

Prepared by Javier Monterroso Montenegro and Tess Petesch; January 8, 2012

The migration channel from Guatemala to the United States is an important one as 98.16% of Guatemalans who live in a foreign country reside in the US and 10% of the population lives there. Ravished by poverty and violence, remittances represent relief at 9.8% of Guatemala’s GDP (\$4.3 billion). Nowadays, approximately half of Guatemalans live below the poverty line which induces many to seek out the perceived benefits of living the “American Dream”. Monetary, social, and legal barriers to migration exist but migration has increased over time due to family reunification and worsening conditions in Guatemala. The high wage variance and high income inequality means that Guatemalan workers are negatively selected. Unskilled workers seek higher wages in the United States.

### **Guatemalan migration to the United States has been fostered by several factors such as violent counter-insurgency campaigns carried out by the Guatemalan government and the wage differentials between the countries.**

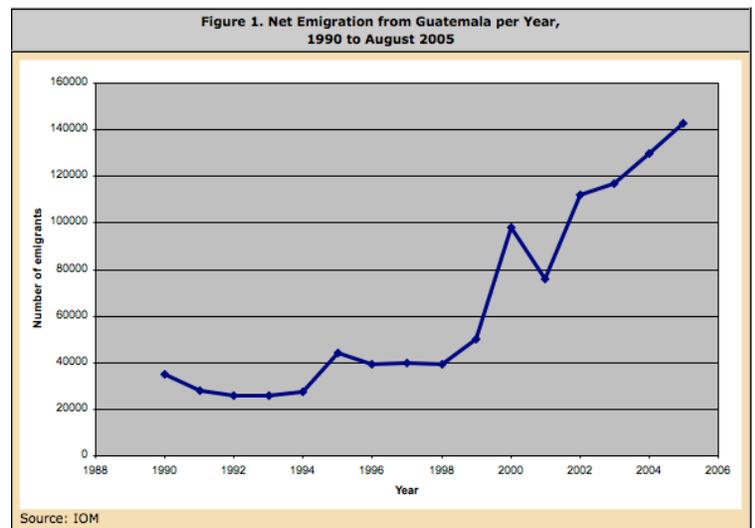
- Beginning of the 1960s, military violence pushed Guatemalans towards the United States where human rights are more protected. Kidnappings, torture, and murders of suspected Guerrillas plagued the country for decades. In 1884, during the Civil War, there were an estimated 1 million Guatemalan refugees.
- Higher wages provide the main incentive for migration. Exposed to high unemployment, land scarcity, overpopulation, and low wages, campesino peasants have fled Guatemala to find work in American agriculture and construction. Minimum wage per hour is \$0.99 in Guatemala where it is about \$7.25 in the United States. GNI per capita is only \$2,740 in Guatemala.
- Poor health services in Guatemala encourage people to seek a higher living standard. There were an estimated 4.7 doctors per 10,000 people in 2009. According to the Guatemalan Institute of Medicine, there are 13,000 doctors and 8,000 of them worked in the capital in 2011.

### **On the other hand, there are reasons for remaining in Guatemala. There are high costs to migrating as well as social and cultural comfort provided by staying in one’s homeland.**

- US laws and quotas create a lengthy and costly process. Deportations at the US-Mexico border reported 7,029 people in 2004, over 29,000 in 2010, and 30,855 deported in 2011.
- Traditional perceptions about women are positively changing in Guatemala. Female enrollment in secondary education has increased from 36% in 2000 to over 55% in 2010. The Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu has empowered women. Efforts by micro-finance institutions have given females hope and optimism for the future.
- Language is another important stay factor. Guatemala has more than 54 dialects spoken in rural areas. Spanish is already a challenge for some Guatemalans and many are intimidated by the language difference.

### **Guatemalan migration to the United States has steadily increased over the last few decades due to wage differentials and other perceived benefits. The table and graph below contain migration figures.**

- Family reunification has drawn Guatemalans to the United States. The fact that more Guatemalans reside in the US provides a comfort and community for them. Cultural ties have grown and currently 1 million live in the U.S. Also, Spanish has become the second most spoken language in the United States.
- Globalization has taken off and the information age encourages migration. It is easier to send remittances today than it was in the past.
- Violence has increased over the years, correlating with increasing migration. In 1999, there were a registered 2,655 homicides, compared to 5,885 in 2006. Throughout the course of the Civil War, migration went from 6,700 in 1960 people to 558,000 in 1996.



- Reforms in the US Department of Labor and Transnational Advocacy Networks have promoted the establishment of migration divisions and programs that protect migrants. As in the case of Maine with Juan Peres-Febles as a commissioner for migrant welfare, living standards have improved.
- During the 1970s a significant number of Guatemalans were granted tourist visas to visit their families in the United States, and in most of the cases, they overstayed their visas, residing as undocumented migrants. The effect of overstayers outweighs the amount of Guatemalans returning home.

**Number of Migrants from Guatemala to the United States (Source: World Bank)**

YEAR	2000	1990	1980	1970
<b>TOTAL</b>	489,507	232,451	72,214	20,482
Males	270,077	123,679	33,031	8,991
Females	219,430	118,772	39,183	11,491

**The majority of Guatemalan migrants are male, uneducated, and unskilled. They mostly perform jobs in agriculture and construction.**

- With 83.7% of the rural population living in poverty, most migrants come from the poor farms in the countryside. Over half of Guatemalans residing in the US are undocumented.
- Approximately 50% of Guatemalan migrants in the United States have some primary education. Just 7% have completed secondary education and 0.6% have professional degrees. Lack of skill channels the Guatemalans into the farm industry and the low skilled jobs in manufacturing like textile work.
- The migrant population is dominated by males at 72%. 28% are female and they mostly perform domestic jobs.
- 77.3% of migrants are in between the ages of 20 and 44 while 17.4% are 45 and over. Many migrants are the males who have gotten married and need to provide for their families.
- Discrimination factors in the Guatemalan workplace against indigenous peoples lead them to migrate to the US because their wages are significantly lower than others; 30% of migrants leave because of this prejudice.
- San Joaquin Valley in California is a popular destination for Guatemalans to pick tobacco. Houston is a destination for the Totonicapán population of Guatemala and they work in a retail chain as maintenance and stock workers.
- In 2011, when over 30,000 were deported, 28,415 were men between 28 and 36 years-old, 1,927 were women between 22 and 37 years-old, and 513 were minors aged between 10 and 17 years-old.

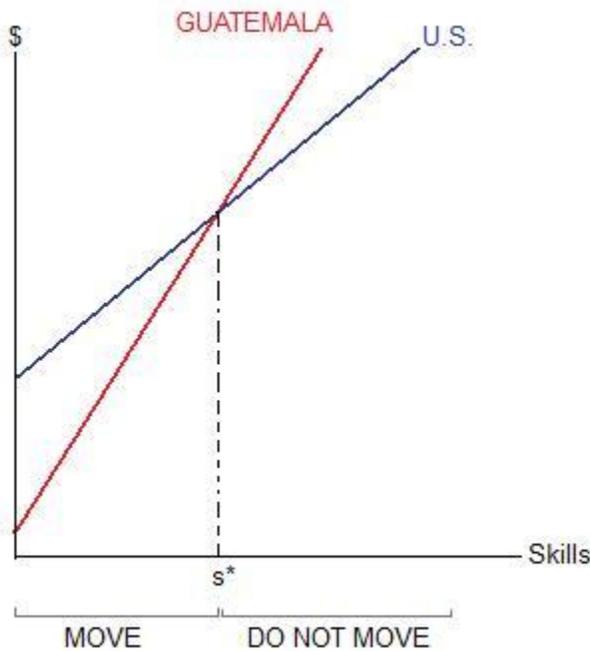
**Barriers to entering the United States are monetary, social, and legal.**

- Coyote fees range between \$2,000 and \$4,000 and illegal border-crossing coincides with risks such as rape, robbery, and imprisonment. Crossing of the Sonora Desert in Mexico takes 5 days and many die from lack of food and water.
- Bureaucratic processes like making an appointment at the embassy (\$12), getting an interview (\$140), obtaining a passport and a visa, and paying for the delivery of all these documents (\$50) are very costly.
- Language is a problem for most of the migrants. Bilingual education in Guatemalan public schools does not exist. Moreover, Guatemalan education in rural areas often lacks sufficient teaching staff.
- For drug cartels, Guatemala-Mexico-US is the main route. Migrants can be kidnapped and used as mules or become victims of human trafficking and prostitution.

**Governmental corruption and low minimum wages in Guatemala create a very unequal distribution of income. The variance of income is exacerbated by these conditions which gives incentive for the most poor and unskilled workers to migrate where they can earn more money.**

- The richest 10% in Guatemala own 46% of national income whereas the richest 10% own 30.2% in the United States. The poorest quintile had only 3.4% of national income in both 2000 and 2006 in Guatemala.
- Control of corruption is estimated by the World Bank to be 1.23 in the United States but -0.706 in Guatemala.
- The Roy model below shows that the lower variance of wages in the US will induce the low skilled, poor Guatemalans to seek the higher minimum incomes in the US. This is an example of negative selection.

## Roy Model



- Negatively selected: Unskilled workers are likely to migrate
- Skilled workers are not likely to move.

**Plagued by poverty and income inequality, Guatemalans seek refuge in the United States where they can make a more decent living. In the future, though the global financial crisis is hitting the United States hard, conditions in Guatemala do not appear to be vastly improving and so migration should continue to increase.**

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