Opinion
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Migrants near Huixtla, Mexico, join a caravan heading to the U.S. border Nov. 27. (CNS/Reute

Migrants near Huixtla, Mexico, join a caravan heading to the U.S. border Nov. 27. (CNS/Reuters/Jose Luis Gonzalez)



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Just as Pope Francis' trip to Cyprus and Greece shone a light on the humanitarian crisis unfolding in the Mediterranean Sea, the good people at the Hope Border Institute have issued a report entitled "No Queda de Otra" on the root causes of immigration that shines a light on the humanitarian crisis at our southern border. "What led you to leave your home?" was the question posed to 51 migrants in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and the answers provide the basis of the report.

The study found that Central Americans tend to migrate for a variety of reasons such as poverty, gang violence or domestic violence. Among the Mexicans they surveyed, violence and threats were the primary reason given for choosing to leave their homes, especially the forced conscription of young men into gangs run by drug cartels. Virtually all those interviewed said that "their income in their country of origin was insufficient to cover basic needs." The twin hurricanes, Eta and Iota, in

November 2020 pushed those struggling already into desperation. Sixty percent of migrants were traveling with their families. Hovering over all these phenomena in the past two years was the specter of COVID-19 and the economic dislocation it occasioned.

The report contextualized the survey responses with important data points. Despite progress in recent years lifting people out of extreme poverty, in 2020, 4.7 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean were "pushed out of the middle class into poverty." They found that in Honduras, one country where migration is the most pronounced, only 25% of the population was fully vaccinated, and in Guatemala that number dropped to 16%.

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The most shocking data point was this: “Nearly 70% of our interviewees were extorted or threatened by a criminal organization or gang at some point in their life. Despite having few resources to hand over, gangs pursued them with an incredible degree of persistence and violence.” We in the U.S. are right to worry about the health of our democracy, but perhaps helping these failing states to our south would be one way to recognize anew the preciousness of living under the rule of law. Our police and legal systems have their problems, to be sure, but we are not a failed state.

The report looks at the impact of climate change on the region and notes we can expect additional migration due to it. Especially in agricultural regions, the cycles of increased drought and heavy rain are destroying a way of life that goes back to the time before the Conquista. Hurricanes have long been a threat to the region, but they are now more frequent and of greater intensity than they were even a few years back. The people most affected, who work the land in the poorer regions of Central America, were not the ones adding greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, yet they have already begun to pay the environmental cost of our industrial revolutions.

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Statistics are important, but they are dry and do not capture the uniqueness of each person's story, so the report includes accounts of some of the individuals they interviewed, changing the names to protect their anonymity. Some of the stories are heartbreaking:

> *For example, Luz, a woman from San Pedro Sula, Honduras, had a degree in marketing, a good job at a bank and a home in a gated community where she was raising two sons as a single mother. When the pandemic began, her salary at the bank was cut by 65% and she took out a $5,000 lempira (approximately $200 USD) cash loan to cover basic expenses. The lenders began extorting her after she had paid off the loan and forced her to pay them over $70,000 lempiras (approximately $3,000 USD) as they stalked her, photographed her coming and going to work and made death threats. She tried to report the crime at two separate police stations but was told at both to keep paying. While family support helped her cope with the greatest dangers, it was not enough to stop the extortion. Several months later in Ciudad Juárez, she was still suffering sadness, depression and guilt from having left one son in hiding in Honduras because she could not pay to travel with both.*

This woman went from a good job to refugee status in a matter of months due to some bad actors and a police force unable to enforce the law. No wonder she fled.

Luz’s story is one you wish everyone could learn. The next time you hear an anti-immigrant blowhard on Fox News or in the church hall after Mass, tell her story. Do they not admire her motherly protective instincts in fleeing a situation that compromised her ability to raise her children? Do they think this woman would not find ways to contribute to America? In what possible understanding of the term is this woman not a refugee? Why did the interview have to occur in Mexico rather than Texas?

Another woman who started poor found herself completely devastated by the hurricanes:

> *Sara, a 43 year-old woman from a small community in Huehuetenango, Guatemala, lived in a home made of earth with a tin roof. She made 15*

> *quetzales (about $2 USD) per day doing laundry and cutting wood in the absence of more steady work, hauled water from outside her home and struggled to manage her colic and gastritis. She noted that drought in the summer and heavy flooding during hurricane season had become a feature of life. This precarity came full circle when the hurricanes destroyed her home entirely.*

One wonders how she found the wherewithal to make it to Ciudad Juárez? When people refer to someone like Sara as "illegal," what law decreed she must be consigned to extreme poverty because climate change had made major storms more frequent and more devastating? Is it a crime to live in the path of a hurricane?

The report finishes with some recommendations. I would put reducing gang violence and strengthening the criminal justice system at the top of the list: Until the rule of law is in place, no other changes are going to improve the lives of people in the countries of origin. The other items are important too: providing economic development support; making “climate change mitigation and adaptation a central pillar of development efforts and root causes policy”; and getting COVID vaccines to the people.

The report also makes recommendations to humanize our immigration policy. I fear that the Biden administration has not been able to conceptualize a political path forward on these issues, let alone flesh out such humanization into specific policies that could pass through Congress. I wish we could foresee the day when the administration would revoke the Title 42 expulsion policy, which denies entry to people from a country where a communicable disease was present — that is to say every country now — but we can't.

Our friends at Hope Border continue their splendid work of advocacy and, with this report, strengthen that work with research. Their findings will not melt the cold hearts of too many Americans, and they won't convince the people at Fox News that the humanitarian crisis south of the border creates a moral crisis on our side of that same border. At this time, both crises are at fever pitch and, on our side, there is nothing but shame.

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A version of this story appeared in the **Dec 24, 2021-Jan 6, 2022** print issue under the headline: Migrants were asked, ‘Why did you leave your home?’ Here’s what

they said.