

Co-Responsibility and Reform: Foreign and Domestic Perspectives on Immigration

Why Immigration Must Be Addressed
as a Domestic and Foreign Policy Issue



AJC

The Arthur and Rochelle
Belfer Institute for Latino
and Latin American Affairs

Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy

LATIN AMERICA INITIATIVE

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The Symposium

Finding an “Intermestic” Solution to Immigration

In the summer of 2014, more than 54,000 children, mostly from the countries of the Northern Triangle, risked their lives trekking to the U.S.-Mexico border. This surge raised important yet familiar questions: What are the push factors compelling migrants to leave their communities? What are the pull factors attracting them to the United States? What are the responsibilities of the countries of the Northern Triangle and of the United States? What domestic and foreign policy approaches are required to effectively address this complex set of issues?

To explore these questions, AJC’s Belfer Institute for Latino and Latin American Affairs, as well as the Mexico Center and Latin America Initiative at Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, convened the symposium “Co-Responsibility and Reform: Foreign and Domestic Perspectives on Immigration.” Held at the Baker Institute in Houston on January 12–13, 2015, the event engaged key actors and stakeholders, including government representatives from the countries of origin, transit, and destination of migrants.

“Our countries are linked by family, by friendship,
by trade, by simple geography.”

- Vice President Joe Biden

at the November 2014 launch of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle of Central America, a partnership between the United States, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador to help promote economic, social, and institutional development

The 114th U.S. Congress began its legislative work with the inclusion of a critical, if controversial, executive action on immigration by President Barack Obama. However, the current focus on President Obama’s executive action should not eclipse a much-needed broader conversation about immigration reform. The symposium attempted to refocus the debate, specifically addressing the international dimensions of immigration and the need to discuss multilateral solutions to what has primarily been defined as a domestic issue.

Broadening the Debate: From National to Regional

For decades, the United States has treated immigration policy as an internal matter, not a foreign policy issue, and has given scant regard to the circumstances driving emigration or the implications for the sending and transit countries.

A consistent theme emerged in the symposium sessions: The response to the current immigration crisis should not consist of unilateral action by the United States. Instead, policymakers should consider multiple variables—both domestic and international in scope. Given the transnational nature of immigration, it is critical that the governments of both receiving and sending countries take responsibility for their roles in migration, cooperate at the highest levels, and understand that policy decisions need to respond to the reality on the ground. This point was particularly emphasized by the leading immigration experts at the symposium, as well as the ambassadors of El Salvador and Guatemala to the United States and Mexico's top government official responsible for Mexican communities abroad.



Diplomats from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico exchange views during the panel discussion on “Immigration: A Regional Perspective.”

Keynote Panel – Immigration: A Regional Perspective

Moderator: Dina Siegel Vann

Director, Belfer Institute for Latino and Latin American Affairs, American Jewish Committee

His Excellency Francisco Altschul

Ambassador of El Salvador to the United States

His Excellency Julio Alejandro Ligorria

Ambassador of Guatemala to the United States

Reyna Torres Mendivil

Director General for Protection of Mexicans Abroad, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mexico

“In the case of Guatemala, [due to the Civil War] we lost our social fabric; we destroy[ed] our economies; we destroy[ed] our infrastructure; the judiciary practically doesn’t exist; and we have to restart from the beginning to try to rebuild our countries.”

- His Excellency Julio Alejandro Ligorria,
Ambassador of Guatemala to the United States

“I would say [the 2014 influx of migrant children] was not a crisis at the border; it was a crisis in our countries.”

- His Excellency Francisco Altschul,
Ambassador of El Salvador to the United States

Key Concepts:

- Due to high crime and poverty, one in 10 citizens of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras has migrated, according to the Inter-American Development Bank.
- Many of the migrant children from the countries of the Northern Triangle are fleeing from violence at home and in their neighborhoods. Unfortunately, during their border crossing, they may fall victim to criminal networks that engage in human trafficking and smuggling. Without addressing the issue of security in migrants’ home countries, they will continue to emigrate despite the dangers of the trip north.
- Addressing gang- and drug-related violence and other security issues in the countries of the Northern Triangle, which play a role in the emigration of hundreds of thousands of people, is essential to the national security of all countries involved. If economic conditions in the three countries improved and generated more jobs, fewer people would emigrate. As long as employment opportunities are insufficient, the perception of more attractive economic opportunities in the United States will continue to be a powerful pull factor.
- Countries of origin must improve domestic conditions to make migration an option, not a necessity. As responsible parties, the countries of the Northern Triangle and Mexico must invest more resources in education and health care and promote economic development that will generate better-paying jobs.

Recent meetings between the presidents of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and the United States have demonstrated a new dynamic of increased interaction and cooperation. The Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle of Central America is a significant step forward and will help promote economic, social, and institutional development in these three countries. Although the Alliance has yet to be fully defined, its existence acknowledges that the problem of immigration is multilateral and that both sending and receiving countries must work together to ameliorate the conditions that compel people to migrate.

President Obama included in his 2015 budget a request for \$1 billion to invest in the Alliance. Read Vice President Joe Biden's New York Times op-ed on the Alliance [**here**](#).

To view the video of the panel discussion, [**click here**](#).

Panel I — A Shared Responsibility? U.S. Foreign Policy and Immigration

Moderator: Tony Payan, Ph.D.

Françoise and Edward Djerejian Fellow for Mexico Studies, and Director, Mexico Center, Baker Institute

Roberta S. Jacobson

Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, U.S. Department of State

Oscar Chacón

Executive Director, National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities

“It is long past time for us to recognize that [immigration] is a foreign policy issue ... If we don't attack the underlying factors of this crisis, we are doomed to repeat it.”

- Roberta S. Jacobson, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs,
U.S. Department of State

Key Concepts:

- The child migrant crisis drew important attention to immigration as an “intermestic” issue—one that concerns both international and domestic interests. The panel discussion expanded the focus beyond U.S. borders to examine the circumstances that cause people to leave their home countries.
- Understanding immigration in the United States requires consideration of the historical, social, political, and economic linkages between sending, transit, and receiving countries. The region is interconnected not only by geographical proximity but also by an increasingly integrated market. Socially responsible trade and investment can help improve economic conditions in the countries of the Northern Triangle and thus remove one of the primary motives for migration.
- The U.S. free trade and investment policies have effects that ultimately end up at its doorstep. There must be an integrated labor mobility policy, just as integrated markets were created for the trade of goods, services, and capital.
- The influx of unaccompanied minors was not a surprise to those following the migration patterns of the countries of the Northern Triangle. The number of migrant children has increased over the last several years from over 30,000 to nearly 65,000 in 2014.
- Two factors may have influenced this spike: 1) high levels of violent crime in the region, including some of the highest homicide rates in the world, and 2) the widespread—though mistaken—rumors that children would automatically classify for amnesty under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Program. Although this is not the case, many parents already living in the United States without documents, as well as parents in the countries of the Northern Triangle fearing

recruitment of their children by gangs, decided to hire human smugglers to bring their children to the United States in the hope that they would qualify for amnesty.

- In order to achieve an orderly regional migration system, countries of the Northern Triangle need improved educational opportunities, better housing conditions, and access to health care.
- While the countries of the Northern Triangle are working to address the factors that push its citizens to migrate north, in 2014 the U.S. Congress failed to provide emergency funding to deal with the unaccompanied child migrants. It is crucial that Congress allocate funding to attend to the child migrants already in the U.S. and to improve conditions in the countries of the Northern Triangle.

To view the video of the panel discussion, [click here](#).



Panel II – Domestic Policy and the Politics of Immigration

Moderator: Charles C. Foster

Chairman, Foster LLP

Sylvia Manzano, Ph.D.

Principal, Latino Decisions

Marc R. Rosenblum, Ph.D.

Deputy Director, Migration Policy Institute

Key Concepts:

- The president's executive action to defer certain classes of deportations emerged from a sense of frustration over Congress' failure to pass comprehensive immigration legislation.
- Political gridlock in Washington burdens the millions of undocumented immigrants who seek employment to pay rent and feed their families, send their children to school, and are active members of American society.
- The United States has a considerable number of undocumented residents because migration is a function of U.S. policy choices that are increasingly mismatched with the reality on the ground. It has been difficult to make adjustments to earlier decisions, even as their effects have been amplified over time, because of the political aspects of the immigration debate. For example:
 - Instead of addressing the visa system, policymakers have focused on security—making it easier to apprehend and deport migrants.
 - Congress made it illegal to hire undocumented workers, but employer sanctions provisions have been nearly impossible to enforce. A more rational visa system would be better for employers; however, it's not perceived as a top priority.
 - Only hard-line interest groups who oppose amnesty and want to decrease immigration favor more enforcement. These groups are relatively small but cohesive, passionate, and concentrated in Republican-leaning electoral districts. Thus, House Republicans have strong political incentives to support an enforcement-only approach to immigration.
- Looming demographic change promises to shift political dynamics, but unfairly drawn electoral maps and low Latino voting rates mean that demographic drivers are still several years away.
 - For Latinos, immigration is personal: Almost everyone knows someone who is undocumented. Increasing political participation among Latinos is key to ensuring that the immigration debate slowly shifts toward the position favored by most Latino voters.

To view the video of the panel discussion, [click here](#).



Keynote Address

María Hinojosa, award-winning NPR news anchor and reporter, provided personal testimonials on the human and humanitarian dimensions of immigration in the countries of the Northern Triangle as well as in the U.S.

To view her remarks, [click here](#).



“How much can we expose young people to human right’s abuses? How many children can we force into a room that then makes them sleep standing up? How much can we get away with not offering due process to them...what does it mean about who we are? Who are we that we let this happen?”

- Maria Hinojosa

Summary

The governments of the countries of the Northern Triangle have recognized the need to design and implement policies that promote security and economic and educational opportunities. These citizens need to feel safe in their communities, have access to job opportunities, and be able to provide their children with a good education and a healthy life style without the threat of them falling into the hands of local gangs and criminal organizations. As a neighbor and partner to these countries, the United States can and should accept its share of responsibility by helping the region find lasting solutions that address the underlying causes of undocumented and disorderly migration, including poverty, unemployment, and weak institutions that lead to corruption and impunity. Under a co-responsibility framework, diplomatic initiatives can begin to lay the foundation for public policies that focus on fostering cooperation for development, promote multilateral solutions that acknowledge labor market integration, and achieve a regional mobility system that is both legal and orderly and serves the needs of both Central America and the United States.

One consequence of the crisis of unaccompanied migrant children has been increased cooperation among the U.S., Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. The international community must keep the lines of communication open and enhance collaboration on immigration, focusing diplomatic efforts on regional development. Most recently, Vice President Biden traveled to Guatemala in March for two days of meetings with the presidents of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and the Inter-American Development Bank to advance implementation of the “Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle” announced last November in Washington, D.C.

Further Reading:

“[Maybe a step closer to immigration reform](#),” by Dina Siegel Vann, published on January 9, 2015, in the Houston Chronicle.

“[Mejor nivel de vida en Centroamérica es clave para frenar emigración a EE.UU.: embajadores](#),” by Alvaro Ortiz, published on January 13, 2015, in La Voz de Houston.

“[Comments on Domestic Policy and the Politics of Immigration](#),” by Marc R. Rosenblum, presented on January 13, 2015, at the symposium.

“[Central America’s Unaccompanied Minors: Shared Problem, Shared Solution](#),” by Erika de la Garza and Tony Payan, published July 31, 2014, in the Georgetown Journal of International Affairs.

“[‘Illegal’ Immigration on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Is It Really a Crisis?](#)” by William C. Gruben and Tony Payan, published October 17, 2014, by Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy.

“[The pervasive myth of an immigration crisis](#),” by Tony Payan and Dylan McNally, published November 18, 2014, in The Hill.

“[Latino Voters in the U.S.](#),” by Sylvia Manzano, presented on January 13, 2015, at the symposium.

Organizing Partners

Baker Institute Mexico Center

The Baker Institute Mexico Center provides policymakers, the public, and industry leaders with quality, data-driven analysis of the policy issues that affect both Mexico and the United States. The center's nonpartisan research assists public policy coordination by framing problems, providing policy alternatives, and contributing to informed decisions that consider both U.S. and Mexican interests. In conjunction with actors in both countries, the Mexico Center envisions a future in which coordinated policy decisions maximize benefits for all who live in the region. In order to facilitate public policy coordination between Mexico and the United States, the center reaches out to scholars and other experts to produce original, empirical research on relevant issues, including trade, security, economics, and infrastructure; fosters the exchange of ideas through public events that bring together decision-makers from both sides of the border; and gathers input from government officials, the private sector, and the general public to develop effective and pragmatic policy recommendations.

Baker Institute Latin America Initiative

The mission of the Latin America Initiative (LAI) is to provide a forum that fosters a better understanding of the cultures, economies, histories, and contemporary affairs of Latin America. LAI's affiliated experts from South and Central America provide research and commentary on trade, economic development, politics, and the democratic culture of the region. Additionally, LAI hosts lectures and public forums addressing social, political, and economic aspects of the hemisphere, as well as of the relationships between Latin American countries and the United States.

Arthur and Rochelle Belfer Institute for Latino and Latin American Affairs

The American Jewish Committee's (AJC) Arthur and Rochelle Belfer Institute for Latino and Latin American Affairs (BILLA) has long been at the forefront of Jewish organizations working to establish and strengthen ties to the increasingly influential countries of Latin America and the growing Latino communities in the United States.

BILLA partners with local Jewish communities throughout Latin America and engages with diplomatic representatives of Latin American countries in the United States to advance relations among Latin America, the United States, and Israel. The institute is headquartered in Washington, DC, with staff in Miami and São Paulo.

AJC's Bridging America Project is a national effort to convene, connect, and engage new and experienced voices from mainstream sectors that can bring additional access and new political power to policymakers; influence the public debate; and promote, support, and enable the passage of comprehensive immigration reform.

AJC works to enhance the well-being of the Jewish people and Israel and to advance human rights and democratic values in the United States and around the world.