



# CAUSE OR CONSEQUENCE?

Reframing violence and displacement  
in Guatemala

THEMATIC REPORT

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This study was researched and written for the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) by Ananda S. Millard (PhD) and Gloria Lara-Florian (MA) of the Policy Research Institute.

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Cover photo: Guatemalan Army members are patrolling a street of Guatemala City downtown. Guatemala City is one of the most dangerous cities in the world. © UNHCR/Daniele Volpe, May 2016

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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<b>SUMMARY</b>	<b>6</b>
Reframing displacement caused by violence . . . . .	6
A baseline for action: understanding and estimating displacement. . . . .	7
<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2. METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>3. BACKGROUND</b>	<b>11</b>
Direct violence. . . . .	11
Structural violence. . . . .	12
Displacement . . . . .	14
<b>4. DRIVERS OF DISPLACEMENT</b>	<b>15</b>
Economic drivers. . . . .	15
Political drivers. . . . .	15
The National Civilian Police . . . . .	16
The justice system . . . . .	16
Social drivers . . . . .	17
Environmental drivers . . . . .	19
<b>5. TRIGGERS OF DISPLACEMENT</b>	<b>20</b>
Forced evictions . . . . .	20
Gangs and organised crime groups . . . . .	21
Other forms of targeted violence . . . . .	22
Criminal violence . . . . .	23

## 6. IMPACTS OF DISPLACEMENT 24

Individual and family-level impacts . . . . .	24
Community-level impacts . . . . .	25
National-level impacts . . . . .	26

## 7. PATTERNS OF DISPLACEMENT 27

Patterns of internal displacement . . . . .	27
Economic displacement . . . . .	27
Displacement and crime . . . . .	30
Gender . . . . .	31
LGBT people and other minorities . . . . .	31
Education and family breakdown and its links to displacement and violence . . . . .	31
Secondary movements . . . . .	32
Links between internal displacement and cross-border movements . . . . .	32

## 8. KEY FINDINGS 33

Key finding 1: Structural and direct violence both force people to move . . . . .	33
Key finding 2: Development projects and disasters are significant drivers of displacement . . . . .	33
Key finding 3: Displacement, crime and violence combine to create a downward spiral . . . . .	34
Key finding 4: Sometimes displacement is the best option, but still unavailable to many . . . . .	34

## 9. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS 35

Bibliography . . . . .	36
Notes . . . . .	38

# SUMMARY

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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, remains a challenge. The phenomenon is not documented systematically 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 decayed data that has not been updated since 1997.<sup>2</sup>

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

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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. Examining the impact of organised crime and violence in Guatemala is not without risk, and many respondents were unwilling or unable to discuss the phenomenon due to the threat such a conversation could potentially pose to them.

Despite these limitations, the research concludes that most displacement associated with direct violence is either caused by state agents' use of force against whole communities, for example forced evictions for development projects, 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 displacement, 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 somewhat 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> With this in mind, this study



A private police officer protects some drinking water containers on a street of Guatemala City, where it is common to see a strong presence of military and private police forces. Photo ©UNHCR/Daniele Volpe, May 2016

uses the term “displacement” 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 from happening in the future, continued 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

Against this backdrop, this research presents four key findings oriented around the principle of national sovereignty as responsibility and the Guatemalan state as the duty bearer. They 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 than those they have left, with the added threat of direct violence and secondary displacement.

Direct violence does play a role in displacement, particularly when those targeted flee in fear of their personal safety. The number of people affected in this way is unclear. Extortion leads to displacement in some cases, most often when there are no alternatives to flight. 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 people 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 leave the areas to which they have been relocated.

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 opportunities to generate income inherent in displacement leads many of those affected to 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. Nor are all those involved in criminal activity violent opportunists who prey on the vulnerable in society. Many see it as their only option.

## | Key finding 4: Sometimes displacement is the best option, but still unavailable to many

Displacement often has 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.

# INTRODUCTION

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According to the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, displaced people are “persons or groups of persons who have been obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised State border”.<sup>6</sup>

Many people who become internally displaced in Guatemala are able to exercise degrees of agency. As such their experiences might sometimes better be described as migration rather than displacement. However, it should be acknowledged that those moving often do so because they feel it is their “best chance”. It is not something they particularly desire, but rather a decision taken because they feel they have few if any viable alternatives.

In reality, drawing a distinction between migration and displacement is somewhat artificial, because the lines between the two phenomena are often blurred. What constitutes choice? What degree of choice is sufficient to shift an event from displacement to migration and vice versa? 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.<sup>7</sup> Any movement, whether largely voluntary or largely forced, is also influenced by subjective views of a situation, a personal threshold for risk, and access to information.<sup>8</sup>

This study uses the term “displacement” to describe movements undertaken by individuals or groups who felt obliged to leave their homes either because of direct violence or due to forms of “structural violence”, a term which describes social mechanisms, state institutions and cultural practices that prevent people from meeting their basic needs.

With this conceptual framework, this study explores the following questions:

1. What are the main drivers of internal displacement, the underlying economic, political, social and environmental factors that contribute over time to people’s decisions to move?
2. What are the main triggers of internal displacement, the factors that actually spark people’s decision to move, or the tipping point that leads to displacement? Triggers vary widely and are often elements of drivers, but the focus here is on the role of direct and structural violence.
3. What are the impacts of internal displacement, whether positive or negative, at the individual, family, community and national level? A positive impact at one level may be negative at another, and vice versa.
4. What are the patterns of internal displacement? Who moves, when and under what conditions, and what is the likelihood of onward movement?

Answering these questions does not support a linear understanding of internal displacement. Rather it reveals that the dynamics which govern the phenomenon are sequential, cyclical or iterative.

## 2

# METHODOLOGY

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This report relies mainly on three types of data: that drawn from the existing literature and reports shown in the bibliography; that gathered via a series of semi-structured key informant interviews with experts including government officials, civil society representatives and academics; and that taken at focus group discussions with people affected by or vulnerable to displacement. The data was reviewed concurrently and used to cross-validate and support the report's findings.

Once the data was reviewed and organised according to the four questions set out in the introduction, the research team identified types of internal displacement, and of structural and direct violence. The team also established patterns or narratives that describe different displacement cycles. These patterns and narratives were then discussed with a selection of key informants with broader knowledge of the phenomena. All the information in this report has been triangulated, but the research team found that discussing patterns and narratives was useful to assure the quality of the findings.

This study uses a system dynamics approach to anchor its data analysis. The information collected has been used to explore relationships along different lines of inquiry and understand how different factors interact to develop plausible narratives.

This approach captures the complexities of internal displacement, but it can also generate so many potential experiences that it can be difficult to distinguish patterns. To overcome this challenge, the data collection and analysis aimed to identify and test likely experiences and focus on the most common or those affecting specific population groups.

The research identified, collected and examined data that highlights some of the main internal displacement issues in Guatemala. It should also be noted, however,

that this process involved challenges that fall broadly into three areas:

- | The existing literature is limited compared with that on other countries in the region, and largely fails to address important questions, such as who stands to benefit from direct violence, internal population movements in general and certain types specifically; the economic links between security providers and organised crime; and why internal displacement tends to be overlooked.
- | Many institutions and individuals are reluctant to discuss internal displacement, never mind their relationship with violence.
- | Data on which to base reliable assessments of magnitude is missing. That which is available only allows for suggestions of the relative magnitude of a particular dynamic, so speaking with any statistical certainty is impossible.

This does not mean that the dynamics the report describes are incorrect, but there may be other unknown experiences that should also be considered. All of the report's assertions have been confirmed by various sources, but the names of respondents who shared specific views are not used. The research team recognises that the information collected is sensitive and that there are potential implications for individuals who shared their perspectives. In the interest of research integrity, individuals' views are discussed anonymously in the main body of the report.

# 3

# BACKGROUND

## DIRECT VIOLENCE

Direct violence has a long history in Guatemala and has taken many forms, of which criminal and gang violence are only the most recent. The country has experienced at least three distinct violent periods in the past 75 years: from 1944 to 1961, when violence was used to oppress and control those who supported political reform; from 1962 to 1996, when the state perpetrated extreme violence as part of counterinsurgency operations during the country's civil war; and post-1996, when violence associated with crime became prominent.<sup>9</sup>

That said, not all violence since the country's 1996 peace accord can be categorised as homogenous or tied to crime. It has many perpetrators, targets and causes. Direct violence ranges from generalised crime and the activities of gangs and organised crime groups to "social cleansing" by private perpetrators and state agents, and includes killings, lynchings, femicide and domestic violence.<sup>10</sup>

The number of crimes reported in Guatemala is widely assumed to be a fraction of those that actually occur. Extremely weak police and justice systems contribute to significant underreporting. Perpetrators often find they are a "law unto themselves" and operate with considerable impunity. Some civil society organisations

and community members say these shortfalls effectively amount to the condoning of violence.

The day-to-day violence Guatemalans experience is manifest in the significant precautions taken for even the most mundane of tasks – many people will only travel around urban areas during daylight hours. For example, the murder of senior government officials is sufficiently common to serve as a stark reminder that even those who are supposed to be safe are not. A former chief justice of the supreme court was shot dead in broad daylight in the centre of Guatemala City in January 2018.<sup>11</sup>

Although the country's homicide rate has fallen in recent years, more general crime and violence are on the rise (see tables 1 and 2). This supports the public's perception, echoed by interviewees and focus group participants, that violence is increasing and security decreasing, particularly in urban areas. The number of detentions has also increased, but this has failed to alter people's perceptions or make them feel any safer.

The number of incidents of domestic violence reported has risen too. The extent to which this is the result of greater visibility is hard to determine, but the establishment of Victims' Assistance Offices (Oficinas de Atención a las Víctimas) in some police stations to support survivors of domestic and sexual violence may have helped to increase reporting of such crimes in recent years.

TABLE 1: Types of violence in Guatemala by year<sup>12</sup>

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Number of reported homicides	6,498	5,960	5,681	5,155	5,253
Homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants	46.4	41.5	38.6	34.2	34.0
Individuals detained for allegedly engaging in criminal acts	23,393	22,985	22,426	24,687	No data reported
Victims of crimes	31,589	31,323	32,485	33,496	No data reported
Domestic violence cases reported	30,391	31,036	32,291	34,812	No data reported

Source: National Institute of Statistics data (2013) and Fundaungo Report

**TABLE 2:** Affected parties by type of crime (2012)

<b>Crimes against property</b>	17,840
<b>Injuries</b>	6,086
<b>Homicides</b>	5,155
<b>Kidnappings</b>	3,550
<b>Sexual violence</b>	822
<b>Other</b>	42

Source: National Institute of Statistics 2013 report

The vast majority of homicide victims are men, with those aged 18 to 29 most affected. Among women, the most affected age group is 18-35. In 2013, the departments of Guatemala, Escuintla, Petén, Izabal and Chiquimula had the highest absolute number of homicides, while Zacapa was the worst affected relative to population size, with 84.3 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. Guatemala was seventh worst affected, with a rate of 51.7. Homicide rates at the department level fluctuated between 2009 and 2013, making long term trends difficult to discern.<sup>13</sup>

There is considerable disparity between the number of reported domestic and sexual violence cases (see tables 1 and 2). This supports the assertion of some respondents, including survivors, that sexual violence, and rape specifically, is commonplace in conjugal relationships, but is often not reported as an element of domestic violence. This implies that statistics on rape and sexual violence primarily involve cases in which the victim and perpetrator were not in a conjugal relationship or living together as a couple.

A number of respondents said they suspected that domestic violence was also underreported. Reasons include fear of further violence; the acceptance of domestic violence as part of a conjugal relationship; lack of support and further victimisation by family and the community, which is also tied to the belief that domestic violence is “normal”; and fear that the police will further victimise the person reporting the event. Similar issues apply to the reporting of rape.

More recent statistics show that 37,750 criminal acts were recorded in 2015 and 38,024 in 2016, an increase of seven per cent. A reduction in most types of crime was offset by a sharp increase of 41.5 per cent in

extortion cases. The number of kidnappings fell by 44 per cent, though the number of cases was small, the decline being from 50 to 28. The number of robberies fell by 10.2 per cent.<sup>14</sup> This is a notable reduction, but it should be noted that interviewees felt mobile phones had become the most commonly stolen goods, and that because there was little chance of police recovering them, such thefts were unlikely to be reported.

## STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

Guatemalans also endure structural violence, a term coined by the Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung in the late 1960s to describe social mechanisms and institutions that prevent people from meeting their basic needs and situations in which direct violence is supported by cultural practices or structures. Some forms of direct violence in Guatemala, such as domestic violence, are arguably structural, but this study treats them as direct because its focus is on how individuals respond. Deprivation of housing, employment, education, healthcare and other basic needs, however, is treated as structural. This type of violence has become the norm in Guatemala, and is experienced routinely by much of the population.<sup>15</sup>

The poverty markers in the table below highlight the seriousness of the situation:

**TABLE 3:** Poverty markers

Marker	Figure	Year	Source
Percentage of Guatemalans who live below the poverty line	59.3	2014	2014 National Survey on Livelihood Conditions
Percentage of indigenous families who live below the poverty line	80	2014	2014 National Survey on Livelihood Conditions
Poverty growth rate (per cent)	8.1	2014 to 2016	National Institute of Statistics (INE)

Economic vulnerability appears to be a widely-held and serious concern, and this is reinforced by other findings that socio-economic factors play a central role in



*A group of children in Livingston, Guatemala. Although primary school enrolment has increased in recent years, a 2016 study estimated it would take 140 years before the majority of the country's population achieved an average of 11 years of schooling. Photo: Shutterstock/Olivier Tabary, March 2015*

the dynamics of displacement (see section 4). Women appear to be more affected than men by economic violence. Their income is often lower and many lack financial independence. In a national survey conducted in 2014 around half of women did not have an independent source of income.<sup>16</sup>

Various interviewees said this affected displacement, as well as victimisation linked to both structural and direct violence, because economically dependent women were more likely to remain in situations of direct violence irrespective of the threats or expected consequences they faced. In the absence of a readily accessible justice system, many women also face economic violence at the hands of their current or former spouses and the fathers of their children, who refuse to provide financial support even though the law requires them to do so.

The National Statistics Institute (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, INE) estimated in 2016 that 2.6 million people between the ages of 14 and 24 were not engaged in any form of education, and an analysis of more detailed INE data from 2014 shows access to education and training to be intricately tied to issues of economic dependence.<sup>17</sup> It reveals considerable gaps in education levels between men and women, urban and rural areas, and indigenous and non-indigenous populations. An indigenous woman from a rural area, for example, had an average of one year of formal education, compared with

an overall average of 3.8 years.<sup>18</sup> It also showed that although primary school enrolment had increased, it would take 140 years before the majority of the population achieved an average of 11 years of schooling.<sup>19</sup>

The data also showed that only 31 per cent of indigenous women were literate, and that illiteracy is concentrated in departments primarily populated by indigenous people. The analysis also noted that only half of the indigenous children in primary school had access to bilingual education, meaning they attended institutions where their mother tongue was not spoken.

Indigenous children aged three to six were 6.6 per cent less likely to be registered in school than their non-indigenous counterparts, and girls aged seven to 12 were two per cent less likely to be registered than boys of the same age and similar background. That likelihood declines significantly as they get older. Girls aged 13-15 were 8.8 per cent less likely to be registered in school, and those aged 16-18 were 9.8 per cent less likely.<sup>20</sup>

These indicators are important for many reasons when examining violence and population movements, including the links between economic conditions, engagement in criminality and the ability to move. Structural violence has direct links with displacement and other forms of violence associated with the phenomena. Age, gender and ethnicity are also inextricably linked.

## DISPLACEMENT

Displacement has a long and distinctive history in Guatemala. During the country's civil war, which lasted from 1960 until 1996, there was considerable displacement including people fleeing government agents who threatened their lives and wellbeing. Anyone who opposed or was thought to oppose the government was threatened, and in the 1980s the authorities adopted a "scorched earth" policy under which entire villages were destroyed and any survivors were displaced.<sup>21</sup> The policy ostensibly targeted opposition and guerrilla forces, but it brutalised large swathes of the population who were not necessarily active in the conflict, with indigenous people chief among them.

The government also used other forms of physical and psychological violence against the general population. The Sepur Zarco case serves as a testament, and includes the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and to "encourage" displacement during the civil war.<sup>22</sup> The displacement that occurred during the conflict has left deep wounds among indigenous populations, coupled with a strong cultural attachment to their ancestral land and a sense of safety associated with home communities. This makes displacement particularly traumatic for indigenous groups.

In terms of current displacement, there is a popular misconception that people from Central America crossing

the border towards the US find this 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 about many challenges, including increased vulnerability to both structural and direct forms of violence, caused by the loss of social networks and structures.

Data on internal displacement is sorely lacking, and the government makes no effort to collect it systematically. 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 decayed data that has not been updated since 1997.

There is, however, a small amount of more recent data on cross-border movements. There were 32,833 Guatemalans deported from the US in 2017, of whom 314 were minors, and 34,501 deported from Mexico, of whom 7,149 were minors deported by land. The number of minors deported by air from Mexico is not recorded.<sup>23</sup> These figures offer no sense of how many people successfully reach their destination, whether illegally or legally, but they do indicate the number of people repatriated, many of whom may well return to a life of internal displacement.



Children in a remote community in Guatemala where IDPs were resettled in the early 2000s. In 2007, the community continued to content with infertile land and limited access to markets while struggling to repay home loans. Photo: IDMC/Ariid Birkenes, November 2007

## 4

# DRIVERS OF DISPLACEMENT

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## ECONOMIC DRIVERS

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In pursuit of national economic growth, the government and the private sector have implemented large-scale development projects, often referred to as “megaprojects”, many of them involving power generation, agribusiness and natural resource extraction. Intended to support the country’s overall development to the benefit of all Guatemalans, many such projects have, in fact, had the opposite effect on local people and communities by deepening their poverty and leading to their displacement (see section 5). There is no data to suggest they have led to improved local livelihoods or better local goods and services. On the contrary, there are indications that some have also damaged protected areas and biospheres.<sup>24</sup>

Displacement associated with development projects is often strongly linked to direct violence. This may involve the burning down of homes and property, the use of extreme violence by the security forces during evictions and the issuing of threats until people “choose” to leave the area. The latter approach, which results in coercive displacement, is reminiscent of the security forces’ brutality toward the general population during the civil war. Even when physical violence is not used, people’s fear of being victimised by state agents is a strong coercive force (see section 5).

One example is the development of the Franja Transversal del Norte en Guatemala, an area made up of the four northernmost municipalities of Guatemala department, known popularly as the Franja de los Generales or The Generals’ Strip because it was the scene of widespread land appropriations by the military high command during the 1970s and 80s. The initial plan was to construct a highway to link the city of Modesto Méndez with the Mexican border and open the way for numerous other schemes, including hydrocarbon oil and gas exploitation, mining, hydroelectric and large-scale

agriculture projects. The highway is still to be built, but other projects have been implemented and have led to displacement.<sup>25</sup>

Structural violence also results from development projects. Economic drivers, which in Guatemala can often be firmly categorised as a form of structural violence, manifest themselves in more subtle ways than direct violence, but their impact is still clear. Projects may use resources that previously supported local livelihoods, often involving subsistence farming, and rural populations may suffer reduced access to irrigation water, lower crop yields and the contamination of their land. Access to services such as education and healthcare may also be reduced. If people’s livelihoods become unsustainable and they are no longer able to meet their basic needs, they may become displaced.

Other types of violence also worsen already challenging economic conditions. Extortion by gangs and organised crime groups plays a significant role in reducing general economic opportunities by crippling the performance of local businesses. Some recent research lists both internal and cross-border displacement as an effect of extortion, but this study found no evidence to support this.<sup>26</sup> Business owners rather appear to “choose” to close down their operations if they are unable to meet the demands made of them, and potential entrepreneurs decide not to start businesses for fear of potential corruption and violence. Statistics show that extortion has grown vastly, and interviewees noted that those coerced try to meet the demands made of them.

## POLITICAL DRIVERS

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There are a number of political drivers of displacement and population movement, mainly the failure to provide security and judicial services, and the economic development policies discussed in the previous section of this report.

## | The National Civilian Police

Guatemala's civil war was characterised by the brutal oppression of the general population, often at the hands of the police and military. This led to a deeply ingrained fear of the security forces. The 1996 peace accord established the National Civilian Police in an effort to move away from the force's militarisation and ensure it conformed with the norms associated with peacetime and democratic process. The recognition of this need to change was commendable, but the transition to a civilian force has still not met all the criteria set out in the country's constitution.

The National Civilian Police has been unstable at the political, operational and administrative level because of changes in the interior ministry and the force itself, which have not favoured the monitoring and institutionalisation of public security policies. The country has had four interior ministers and four police chiefs between January 2015 and April 2018, and in some cases, their removal has been because of engagement in criminal and/or administrative violations of the law.

Many police staff, including the trainers of new recruits, come from the previous force, and this has meant some of the bad practices of the past have endured. A number of high-profile cases have highlighted this, such as the case of one officer who eventually received a 20-year prison sentence for torturing and raping an indigenous woman.<sup>27</sup> Interviewees including indigenous people and others familiar with the realities of their experience said police officers routinely patrolled, dressed in special uniforms and carrying heavy weaponry, to instil fear. Such cases have reduced the public's confidence in the police. The force is also understaffed and undertrained.

There have also been positive developments. There are now 53 Victims' Assistance Offices in police stations, to respond to the needs of female survivors of domestic and other forms of gender-based violence.<sup>28</sup> The existence of the offices, however, does not necessarily mean effective service provision. The officers who run them also have other duties, which means there is often no one there to receive the survivors. It is also thought that not all officers trained in supporting survivors of domestic and gender-based violence are deployed in that line of work even though the number of Victim Assistance Offices is less than what is needed and those that exist are routinely understaffed.

This indicates the limited political priority given to safeguarding the rights and safety of the general population and women in particular. There is also insufficient attention given to service provision for indigenous people, evidenced by the limited number of officers certified as able to communicate in indigenous languages. This means cases involving indigenous people are more likely to be dismissed because evidence was not adequately collected. Importantly, despite there being police officers who do speak indigenous languages, if such skills are not certified the testimonies they collect in languages other than Spanish is not admissible in court.

In the absence of full public confidence in the police, and the force's shortcomings in providing full protection, some people seek alternative mechanisms to ensure their own security. This may include moving away to escape danger, or joining gangs, particularly in areas where they operate as *de facto* authorities.

## | The justice system

Guatemala's justice system is extremely weak, as evidenced by the lengthy and cumbersome processes required to secure a guilty verdict against perpetrators of crime and violence, and the lack of mechanisms to protect plaintiffs and witnesses from violent retribution. This leads to the perpetration of direct and structural violence with impunity, often against women.

Fathers are legally bound to provide financial support for their children regardless of their relationship with the mother, but it is almost impossible for women – who are often less educated than men – to navigate the unwieldy mechanisms required to bring a successful case without legal aid, which is limited at best. This effectively means the justice system impedes the ability of women who are single parents to meet their children's basic needs.

Such discrimination can lead to the displacement and/or break up of single-parent households. If mothers have family members who can care for their children, they may move to urban areas in search of employment. A second option is for mothers to leave with their children. If they are able to find live-in house-keeping work they may be able to keep their children with them, but more often care is provided by family members or basic childcare facilities. A third option is for mothers and older children, or children alone, to be displaced. This can have enduring effects on a



Group of Maya children using public transportation. Indigenous Guatemalans are systematically discriminated against and tend to have less access to government services. Photo: Shutterstock/streetflash

child's life and future earning power if they are forced to leave school or their limited skillsets hinder their employment opportunities.

## SOCIAL DRIVERS

Social drivers of displacement and population movements are rooted in commonly-held views and perspectives, and how those views and perspectives emerge in social interactions and engagement. The two most prominent social factors in Guatemala are gender and ethnicity. Other forms of prejudice also serve as social drivers, such as discrimination against openly lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people and those suspected of belonging to the LGBT community.

Education is generally under-accessed in Guatemala, and social norms dictate that formal schooling is not valued as seminal to growth, development and improving livelihoods. These norms are cemented by an educational system that does not focus on preparation for the job market and is often of questionable quality.<sup>29</sup> Within this construct women and indigenous people, and indigenous women in particular, tend to have least formal education. State provision is a key factor in access to

education, but social constructs associated with gender and ethnicity cannot be overlooked.

Guatemalan society is deeply patriarchal and discriminatory against indigenous populations, which means families are less likely to support women's education and the government is less likely to ensure adequate services in largely indigenous areas. The fact that indigenous populations tend to favour tradition and ancestral culture over formal education is also a factor.

Women's role in society tends to be regarded as subservient to men and centred on the home and childcare, while male family members are responsible for the household's economic security. Widespread economic hardships, poverty and limited access to opportunities have led more women to actively engage in securing an income, but this shift has not been accompanied by a social shift toward supporting women's equal access to schooling or equal pay for equal work. A similar disconnect applies to indigenous people, many of whom have been forced to seek entry into the labour market by their forced or coerced displacement and shrinking opportunities in their home areas.

## SAFETY IN NUMBERS: GIVING VOICE TO INDIGENOUS WOMEN

The Asociación Grupo Integral de Mujeres Sanjuaneras (AGIMS), which loosely translates into English as the Association of Women of San Juan, is a grassroots organisation set up in San Juan Sacatepéquez in 2001 in response to the persistent physical and psychological victimisation of the area's indigenous women at the hands of their husbands, partners and other, often male, family members. It has challenged patriarchal culture and demands that women be respected, listened to and able to live free of violence.

AGIMS has made notable changes in the way women are treated in



Photo: Shutterstock/Lucy Brown - loca4motion

their homes and communities, but these results did not emerge overnight. All of the interviewees for this study who have worked with AGIMS stress that its success has been in no small part because of the persistent collective mobi-

lisation of women. The group currently has 2,165 members, all of them indigenous women, which enables it to demand change in ways that would otherwise not be possible.

Men may traditionally have been responsible for their family's economic wellbeing while the family unit is intact, but men not meeting their financial responsibilities for their children or other dependents is largely accepted once a couple has broken up. The term "economic violence" is widely used in Guatemala to describe men's economic abandonment of their children and female partners.

Gender-based violence also has strong social elements. It is largely considered acceptable, particularly in the context of domestic violence against women by their husbands or male partners. Survivors, perpetrators and their respective families and communities tend to view this type of violence as normal, which means there is no protective buffer for survivors. For those unwilling to accept this status quo, their only recourse is to turn to displacement or police protection. The rare exception is when communities of women have organised to protect themselves (see box above).<sup>30</sup>

Economic dependence and the acceptability of domestic violence have long been understood as deeply intertwined. Women who experience domestic

violence often have to choose between economic security by staying with their abusive partner or enduring economic hardship in exchange for an end to their victimisation. Guatemala's weak police and justice system also play a role in perpetuating this violence, because survivors have little or no recourse to official protection or restitution.

This predicament challenges the notion that displacement is always the less favourable outcome. For survivors of domestic and other forms of gender-based violence, moving may be the only option to achieve physical safety, although it may also lead to other forms of hardship, specifically economic violence.

The displacement of minorities such as LGBT people is also a notable phenomenon in Guatemala, and often involves leaving a rural or peri-urban area for an urban centre in search of anonymity and an escape from discrimination. Discrimination can also lead to violence, although the degree to which this happens is statistically unclear. Urban communities also discriminate against LGBT people, albeit perhaps less than rural ones. The LGBT community is given little if any recognition and

support, which means that police protection is limited at best and there is little or no data on their plight.

## ENVIRONMENTAL DRIVERS

Guatemala is prone to sudden-onset disasters such as earthquakes, tropical storms and other extreme weather events and slow-onset phenomena including drought and other climate change impacts that may devastate crop yields and the livelihoods of subsistence farmers. The overuse and misuse of natural resources such as rivers has also rendered some land infertile and unstable, and the indiscriminate and uncontrolled use and disposal of chemicals has seriously affected agricultural productivity. Rural communities, a considerable proportion of which are indigenous, are highly dependent on their land as a source of income and prosperity. Their largely subsistence economies also provide only limited buffers against sudden hardships.

The emergence of what has come to be known as Central America's dry corridor, an area that includes parts of Guatemala and which has suffered unprecedented drought attributed to climate change, has led to considerable hardship. It has left around 3.5 million people from the region in need of humanitarian assistance, and by some calculations reduced agricultural production by between 70 and 80 per cent between 2014 and 2015.<sup>31</sup> Around 248,000 families suffered moderate or severe food insecurity in 2016, of whom more than 68,000 depended on a single annual harvest, meaning that any reduction in yield affects their food security for the rest of the year.<sup>32</sup>

These challenges are compounded by a lack of technology and support to mitigate climate impacts. Finding durable solutions of these kinds is vital, because 70 per cent of Guatemalans depend on rain-irrigated agriculture as their principal food source.<sup>33</sup>

Such environmental challenges drive displacement dynamics, and affect the economically disadvantaged the most. Their housing tends to be of lower quality and less resistant to sudden-onset hazards, and is also more likely to be located in areas exposed to them. Large-scale development projects that overstretch natural resources or pollute land and water courses with toxic substances have a considerable long-term impact on local communities. Land is left less fertile, crop yields

decrease and in more extreme cases water is rendered undrinkable and livelihoods collapse.<sup>34</sup> These events lead to displacement in search of better options as local land and livelihoods degrade.

Measures to protect the environment, such as the establishment of nature reserves, have also led to population movements.<sup>35</sup> As the government has become more aware of the need to protect endangered species and fragile biospheres, communities living close to protected areas, many of which are indigenous, have been prevented from continuing to exploit them. This has considerable benefits for the ecosystems in question, but presents clear challenges for communities living in the area, who also face pressures in the other direction as the impacts of drought and reduced agricultural productivity push them to exploit previously untouched areas.

The encroachment onto protected land has in some cases led to the violent or coerced displacement of farmers and their communities (see section 5). In other cases, people leave of their own volition when they realise their livelihoods have become unsustainable. Protecting Guatemala's natural heritage and resources is positive, but at the same time there is no indication that the government is implementing strict and systematic mechanisms to ensure development projects do not damage the environment. On the contrary, interviewees suggested that such projects are permitted to operate with disregard for the sustainable use of resources and environmental conservation, even in protected areas.

# TRIGGERS OF DISPLACEMENT

## FORCED EVICTIONS

The Guatemalan government reserves the right to move entire communities when it sees fit, their displacement often driven by a demand for land and resources for development projects. It also evicts people to ensure that local populations do not abuse protected areas and resources.

Eviction, which is a form of displacement, is considered legal. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement stipulate that this can be the case, but only if strict conditions regarding the rights of those evicted are met. Government evictions tend not, however, to meet international standards on procedure, process and compensation.<sup>36</sup> Evictions often involve excessive force and may include the destruction of people's assets. The violence perpetrated by the security forces during evictions, and the reasons why it is so prevalent and severe are not well documented, but much of it involves indigenous populations. Non-indigenous smallholding farmers are also targeted.

**TABLE 4:** Departments affected by agrarian conflict in 2014

Department	Number of agrarian conflicts	Number of people involved
Izabal	142	2,984
Quiché	325	3,033
Petén	150	4,419
Baja Verapaz	54	5,137
Alta Verapaz	220	5,216
Total	891	20,789

Source: SAA, 2014, *Report on agrarian politics and conflict*

Targeted violence, including the detention of local leaders and people who openly oppose government projects or relocation plans, also triggers displacement. The fact that families are responsible for an incarcerated member's upkeep helps to ensure that those with scarce resources are less likely to object openly to government schemes.

The direct violence associated with evictions clearly triggers displacement, and cases involving the threat of potential violence and strict limitations on the use of resources contribute to (or exacerbate) structural violence, which in turn leads to displacement.

The most recent official data on "agrarian conflicts" - disputes between the government and smallholders over the right to settle, or forced displacement - is from 2014 and lists 891 conflicts affecting 20,789 people. The data, however, only covered the six departments considered most prone to such conflicts (see table 4). There are 1,419 recorded cases of agrarian conflict nationwide, affecting 1,489,080 people from 159,623 families and concerning 295,325 hectares of land.<sup>37</sup> Only 40 cases are currently under legal review.<sup>38</sup>

The government is reported as having displaced 1,197 people as a result of agrarian conflicts in 2017, 450 from Laguna Larga in Petén department, 304 from Chab'il Ch'och' in Izabal, 125 from Tactic in Alta Verapaz, 123 from Barberena in Santa Rosa, 100 from Santa Cruz Verapaz in Alta Verapaz and 95 from Senahú, also in Alta Verapaz. People evicted as a result of these conflicts may continue to suffer adverse consequences of displacement (see section 6).<sup>39</sup> Interviewees noted that people evicted are likely to move repeatedly, each movement potentially triggered by different factors (see figure 1).

FIGURE 1: Government-triggered displacement cycle



## GANGS AND ORGANISED CRIME GROUPS

Organised crime in Guatemala has many facets, including significant involvement in cross-border drugs, people and weapons trafficking. Organised crime groups are also alleged to have close ties to political elites and the security forces, and to be engaged in legal as well as illicit businesses. Understanding these dynamics is difficult, because information is limited and investigating suspected links to prominent figures and organised criminal activity more broadly is dangerous.

This tends to mean that violence perpetrated by gangs is emphasised over that carried out by organised groups, but the latter plays a significant role in triggering displacement. In the most extreme cases, such groups publish lists of names and tell those on them - often young men - that they will be killed if they do not leave quickly, often within 24 hours. The prevalence of this practice is not known, but the phenomenon is well recognised.

Organised crime groups are also heavily involved in coercion and extortion, which may lead to displacement when those targeted by extortion are no longer able to meet their demands, and it is increasingly clear

that they play a much larger role in low-level crime than previously thought.<sup>40</sup> They may also hire gangs to carry out activities, but it is generally accepted that while organised crime groups have been able to corrode national institutions and gain access and impunity by doing so, gangs have not. Gangs are able to operate because they tend to engage in activities out of the reach of the police and justice systems.

Gangs' criminal activities are usually more localised and smaller scale. They often seem to form as a mechanism to protect their members, and in some cases their communities, and engage in illicit activity. Some gangs also engage in extortion. Gangs are prevalent in urban "red zones", so called because they suffer high levels of direct violence. They often engage in direct violence during gang initiation rituals and turf wars with competing gangs, and are seen as responsible for much of the country's petty and violent crime.

There is also a general perception among people who live in areas where gangs are prevalent that they do not attack their own communities, but instead serve as a protection buffer and as enforcers of local codes of conduct. This, combined with the absence of a functional police and justice system, and the uncertainty and upheaval of moving, leads many community members to stay put, as the system they live under is at least familiar.

FIGURE 2: Cycles of displacement driven by organised crime groups and gangs



Direct violence meted out by gangs and organised criminal groups does lead to some displacement. In these cases, however, displacement occurs not because there is a presence of gang violence or organised crime, but because an individual or his/her family have been specifically targeted. Indeed, populations most affected by direct violence and “social cleansing” often have few resources that would enable them to move, and as a result they leave only when they have been directly targeted and have no other option. Overall, the existence of gang violence and organised crime tends not to be the trigger for most movements. Those interviewed for this study consistently said economic hardship caused by structural violence was the principal cause of internal displacement, and living in the midst of organised crime and gang activities had become largely normalised.

Most people focus their efforts on finding ways to avoid being subject to organised crime, or targeted by gangs, rather than on opportunities to move. Interviews conducted for a 2015 evaluation of interventions in a “red zone” of Guatemala City reveal, for example, that people generally choose not to open small businesses because they fear extortion by either organised crime or local gangs and ending up no better, if not worse, off.<sup>41</sup> In cases where they are victims of extortion, community members still try to find a way to resolve the issue without having to move. Even so, it should also be noted that asylum applications often list threats of violence as the main reason for lodging the request, and that

some organisations see growing violence in Guatemala and elsewhere in Central America as the main cause of increasing cross-border movement.<sup>42</sup>

## OTHER FORMS OF TARGETED VIOLENCE

Violence targeted at individuals triggers displacement. Perpetrators may include government agents, organised crime groups, gangs and even members of the general population. Organised crime groups tend to mete out targeted violence when someone has failed to meet the demands made of them or has violated the group’s trust. Gangs may specifically target members or former members if they are perceived as having betrayed the gang in question or broken its code of conduct.

Other examples include threats of lynching, which may occur when a community suspects someone has committed crimes for which the authorities have not brought them to justice; threats and violence against members of the LGBT community; and domestic violence that causes women to fear for their lives or those of their children.

Even in cases of targeted violence, those displaced must have the economic means to leave their homes. Displacement may not be a viable response to the threat of injury or death for all.



*Dulcie is transgender and fled Guatemala after being persecuted by police and gangs. When gangs raised the extortion amount they received from Dulcie from 200 Quetzal to 400 Quetzal per week, she could no longer pay and knew they would kill her if she stayed. "In Guatemala the police were as bad as the gangs because I am transgender. The police would not protect me. Here in Mexico I feel respected and safe." Photo © UNHCR/Sebastian Rich, February 2016*

Government agents also engage in targeted violence. This may lead to the displacement of whole communities, but leaders and activists are often targeted individually first. They may be threatened, harmed or even killed with the intention of coercing communities to "voluntarily" relocate to areas designated as their new homes, often to make way for development projects (see figure 2).

## CRIMINAL VIOLENCE

General criminal violence tends not to trigger internal displacement, but there are indications that it may lead to cross-border flight. Much of Guatemala's population is exposed to criminal violence, particularly in urban areas. Examples include robberies on public transport, in some cases covertly targeting individuals, in others forcing all passengers on a bus to hand over their money and mobile phones; and assaults and carjackings at traffic lights.

People are also exposed to and sometimes caught up in violence between gangs and attacks associated with their initiation rituals, while high stress levels and the prevalence of small arms and knives mean that arguments, between drivers for example, may escalate with

violent and sometimes deadly consequences. Many civilians also witness violence between police and presumed criminals, and targeted homicides.

The fact that much of Guatemala's criminal violence is concentrated in urban areas does not appear to deter people from moving to them when they leave their home areas.<sup>43</sup> The many reasons for this are understudied, but the economy's role in displacement and the prospect of better income and livelihoods associated with urban centres, whether real or imagined, are likely to be significant factors. There appears to be little evidence of people moving within, or between, urban areas, possibly because there is little to choose between them in terms of violence levels unless those on the move are in a position to leave low-income areas for more prosperous and secure neighbourhoods.<sup>44</sup>

Increasing criminal violence in urban centres is tied, at least in part, to the growing urban populations, to the extent that the phenomenon appears to be more a consequence than a cause of displacement (see section 6). This suggests that understanding violence as a driver of displacement requires a detailed study to map out variations of violence across the country.

# IMPACTS OF DISPLACEMENT

Displacement has a wide range of impacts at the individual, family, community and national level, some connected to their triggers and drivers and others that are broader and affect most if not all of those on the move. They can be positive, negative or both, but the lack of data on internal population movements makes assessing them in statistical terms difficult at best. As a result, the findings in this section are based largely on interview data and what is already known about violence and urban centres. The vast majority of people who leave their homes move toward urban centres, so it can be taken as given that new arrivals also feel the impacts of violence.

**TABLE 5:** Remittances by Guatemalans who have migrated to the US (in millions of US dollars)

Year	Remittances (USD)
2010	4,126.784
2011	4,387.032
2012	4,782.728
2013	5,105.129
2014	5,544.097
2015	6,284.977
2016	7,159.967
2017	8,192.213
2018 (January only)	634.581

Source: Congressional commission for migrants, 2018

## INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY-LEVEL IMPACTS

The impacts of displacement at the individual and family levels are manifold. One ostensibly positive effect are the remittances of Guatemalans who have moved to the US,

which doubled between 2010 and 2017 from more than \$4 billion a year to more than \$8 billion (see table 5). This income flow, however, leads to the erroneous perception among the country's rural and peri-urban population that moving to urban areas might also help them support their families. In reality, it may actually have the opposite effect and lead to greater economic vulnerability.

Many respondents said that people who move to urban areas, where their cost of living increases, often find they lack the social networks and marketable skills to secure a new livelihood and generate enough income for themselves, let alone to be able to send money home. Women are particularly affected in this way, because they tend to have fewer marketable skills than men from the outset. The need for skills development is a key concern.<sup>45</sup> IDPs fleeing violence also tend to gravitate towards urban areas, with very similar consequences.

A number of interviewees pointed to the breakdown of people's social networks as a major issue that increases their vulnerability not only in economic terms but on many other levels. Even when the government forcibly displaces and relocates whole communities, the poor quality of life in their new area often leads individuals and families to move again, breaking up the community group.

People who have lost their social networks are more likely to face abuse or unfair treatment at the hands of unscrupulous employers and colleagues in new environments they are ill equipped to navigate. Children and young people in this situation, particularly boys, are more likely to join gangs or organised crime groups as a means of protection, and young women are more likely to become involved in relationships that are often abusive and lead to early pregnancy.<sup>46</sup>

In the first six months of 2016, 1,103 children were registered as born to mothers aged between 10 and 14, despite the fact that having sexual relations with a child under the age of 14 or younger is a crime, and 37,655

children were born to mothers aged 15 to 19.<sup>47</sup> These figures are for the general population, but they highlight a trend of sexual violence and early parenting to which displaced girls and young women are also vulnerable, perhaps even more so if their social network is limited.

The prevalence of violence and the activities of organised crime groups in urban areas make living conditions for new arrivals more difficult in a number of ways, and they may be discouraged from setting up their own small businesses for fear of being targeted with extortion demands. Extortion is commonplace in Guatemala. INE data from 2013 shows that 5,583 cases were recorded, making it the third most-reported crime, but interviewees said the figure is likely to be the tip of an iceberg because many cases are not reported. The same data shows that 56.2 per cent of the cases recorded were in Guatemala City, and 69 per cent in urban areas more broadly.<sup>48</sup>

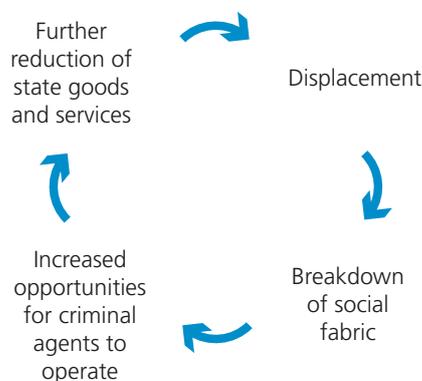
New arrivals are more susceptible to becoming perpetrators as well as victims of violence and crime, ranging from petty theft to armed robbery, which are far more prevalent in low-income urban areas than better-off neighbourhoods. Members of low-income urban communities, particularly young men, are also often the targets of “social cleansing” and extrajudicial executions. Killings are perpetrated with impunity by the state and by civilians of higher socio-economic standing, who target children and young people suspected of being gang members or engaging in criminal activity.

Children, older people and those with disabilities are among the groups worst affected by displacement. Education opportunities may be better in urban areas, but the struggle to meet families’ increased living costs and basic needs may result in children being taken out of education in order to work. Many new arrivals also suffer deteriorating health, in the form of new conditions or the worsening of existing ones, as a result of changes in climate, inadequate shelter, overwork, poor working conditions, stress and reduced nutrition. As with education, health and care facilities may be better in urban areas, but economic hardship puts them out of reach for many displaced persons.

The psychological impact of displacement is also significant. The upheaval of moving may be destabilising, and the struggle to survive in unfamiliar surroundings, often alone, adds to people’s stress. Domestic violence may increase among families who move as a unit, and indige-

nous people may also face additional trauma because of discrimination and detachment from their ancestral land.

FIGURE 3: The displacement spiral: when impacts become drivers and drivers become impacts



The data collected for this study shows that internal displacement leads to few improvements in people’s lives. One exception, however, is when new arrivals have skills which allow them to access employment opportunities in urban centres that were unavailable in rural areas. This in turn may also improve their access to education and healthcare services. Some people, such as members of the LGBT community, may find greater acceptance in urban areas, or at least that they are more able to socially integrate.

## COMMUNITY-LEVEL IMPACTS

The impacts of displacement are felt by communities of origin and host communities. When considerable numbers of people leave over time, communities of origin lose social cohesion and their social networks are weakened. This makes it more likely that gangs form, and general and organised crime increase.

A reduction in population also means that government agencies, which may not have had a strong presence in the first place, become even less willing to make goods and services available to a community. This contributes to a vicious circle in which criminal activity and further population movements become more likely (see figure 3).

The social fabric of host communities is also strained by influxes of new arrivals, particularly when many people gravitate to the same area. Widespread violence and

crime makes suspicion and fear of strangers common both among local residents and the new arrivals themselves. This lack of openness and trust leads to limited information exchange, which prevents the development of new social networks, and does not strengthen existing ones. This lack of social cohesion creates a space in which crime and violence become more likely, especially because any available non-criminal work is likely to be in the informal sector, access to which depends on social networks.

Host communities often live in informal urban settlements that are effectively un- or at least under-regulated. Homes and any infrastructure are built without city planning or involvement, and the provision of state goods and services tends to be limited if it exists at all. This leads many new arrivals, who find such areas uncondusive to permanent settlement, to remain only temporarily in the host community, before they move elsewhere, including abroad (see figure 4).

Communities that move *en masse*, particularly those forcibly displaced by the government and assigned a relocation area to make way for development projects, might be expected to retain their social cohesion. In practice, however, relocation areas are often unsuitable. They may be in areas exposed to weather or other hazards, the land on offer may not support farming and plots may be too small. Given these conditions, relocated communities often disintegrate as their members move on in search of better prospects.

## NATIONAL-LEVEL IMPACTS

It is difficult to understand the impact of internal displacement at the national level because of the lack

of reliable data on the issue, which is a symptom of the low priority the government attaches to it. Reasons for this include a focus on the more internationally visible phenomenon of cross-border movement, prejudice and discrimination, avoidance of the implications of poor socio-economic conditions and corruption in driving violence and population movements and the state's failure to address them, and fear of deterring investors and tourists by acknowledging the scale of these issues.

Guatemala has an estimated annual urbanisation rate of 3.2 per cent, the highest rate in Central America, and 79 per cent of the country's population is expected to be living in urban centres by 2032.<sup>49</sup> The many new arrivals to urban areas are forced to focus entirely on earning enough income to get by, at the expense of education and training, which means that the country's working-age population is poorly prepared to enter the formal labour market and take advantage of any employment opportunities which may exist. A significant number of people are engaged in the informal sector or in low-paid jobs, which reduces tax revenues, making it harder for the government and other state actors to provide public goods and services.

As previously noted, one area in which displacement arguably has a positive effect for the country as a whole is when it takes place as part of efforts to establish nature reserves and protect biospheres. The displacement of populations that encroach on protected areas has the potential to play an important role in conservation, but can only be justified when evictions take place in line with established international standards in terms of compensation, resettlement and rehabilitation – something which the data collected for this study clearly suggests does not happen.<sup>50</sup>

FIGURE 4: The triggers and drivers of onward movements of IDPs from host communities



# PATTERNS OF DISPLACEMENT

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Displacement within and beyond Guatemala takes on many different forms and patterns, shaped in part by the varying effects of direct and structural violence on different groups and subgroups of the population. This section discusses how displacement occurs, the links between different varieties of internal displacement, and those between internal and cross-border movements.

Examining these dynamics is hampered by the lack of comprehensive and robust data. Some statistics are available and have been included in this report, but their reliability is unclear.

## PATTERNS OF INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT

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Internal displacement has contributed significantly to uncontrolled and unmanaged urbanisation in Guatemala, and is driving the growth of informal settlements with few if any public services and high levels of violence and insecurity. Some displacement to rural and peri-urban areas takes place, but the vast majority of movements are to urban centres where people arrive at a slow rate, and apparently at random. They receive little state support, and their plight is ostensibly invisible. Exceptions to this include the displacement of whole communities or large parts of them to make way for development projects, or to escape the impacts of sudden-onset disasters.

The apparent randomness of population movements is, however, a misconception. An examination of their drivers and triggers reveals a pattern of vulnerability, with violence at both ends of the displacement experience. Structural violence is the most prevalent cause or significant factor in driving displacement, but direct violence or the threat of it, most often when specific individuals are targeted, also forces people to move. Once a person has been displaced once, they often find themselves in situations that cause or trigger their

onward displacement. Each movement makes displaced people more vulnerable to being targeted by, or perpetrating, violence, which leads to further displacement. This phenomenon is not possible to quantify.

## I Economic displacement

The economy has played a central role in driving displacement in Guatemala. Poverty and a lack of opportunities, goods and resources – all forms of structural violence - are significant underlying causes of displacement, but the data suggests that poverty alone does not explain population movements. Economic displacement is, in fact, closely connected to structural violence and people's inability to meet their basic needs, and includes a number of contributing factors.

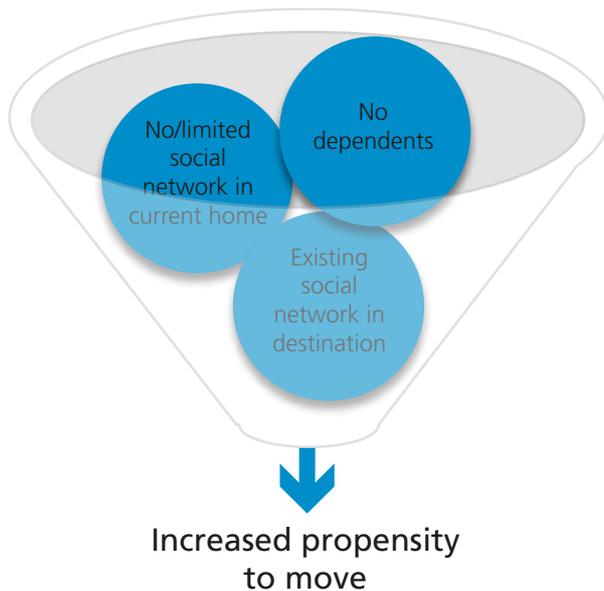
People living in "extreme poverty" struggle to secure food and shelter. Their economic realities, however, may either drive them to move or prevent their movement. For people living below the poverty line, a range of factors impact upon and determine their ability to move, including the number of people who depend on them. People with children, older relatives, or family members with disabilities to care for are most likely to remain where they are, because moving presents uncertainties that are more difficult to manage with dependents. People without dependents are more likely to accept these risks and uncertainties.

Men and women's attitudes towards dependents also contribute to different patterns of movement. In general, because of a range of factors including, but not limited to, social expectation, many women feel a greater responsibility towards their children and other family members in need of care and assistance, which makes them much less likely than men – who often feel less direct responsibility for dependents – to move. A further factor resulting from this was shared by our study's participants, who explained that even men who leave in order to find an improved income so they can

better provide for their family often meet and start a new family with a new partner, leaving their original family with no income or support. The combination of lack of any income and dependents reliant solely upon them, makes the women left in this position among the least likely to be able to move.

This is one major reason why economic issues appear to be key drivers in the displacement of younger men, rather than any other demographic group.

**FIGURE 5:** Social networks and displacement dynamics



A further factor affecting people’s ability and propensity to move is whether they have social networks beyond their home area. Those with such networks, who can rely on, or at least expect, support such as accommodation, assistance finding work, and help meeting their basic needs until they find employment, are more likely to move than those who cannot expect any support. Support is also a significant ‘push factor’, as those who have no social and support network where they live are even more likely to move, while those who do have such networks around them are anecdotally more likely to remain (see figure 5).

Assets among people living below or close to the poverty line are closely connected to ‘opportunities’ elsewhere, and to support networks. People who have material goods, and/or secure employment or some semi-stable source of income, are also less likely to move than those who do not have any of these things, even if

their livelihoods are under consistent threat, and they are experiencing structural and/or direct violence. In these instances, the risk of losing what they have, even if it is objectively small or worth little financially, outweighs the potential benefits of moving.

Conversely, those who can take their assets with them, and are therefore at little risk of losing them, are most likely to move, whether for improved opportunities, or because they experience or are threatened with direct violence. One example raised by our participants was of women who face domestic violence: those who can leave and take their assets with them are far more likely to become displaced than those who cannot, or have few or no moveable assets. Moving, however, often leads to new exposure to structural and direct violence.

These economic drivers apply to individuals, but as we have noted in this report, the Guatemalan government forces the displacement of rural communities to make way for development projects or nature reserves, or to clear communities it argues have illegally or unjustifiably encroached on such areas. This process starts with the government issuing notices to leave, escalates to threats of violent removal as well as coercion and the threatening, targeting and even killing of community leaders. If the community still refuses or fails to move, this results in its forced removal. Forced removal may also lead to entire villages being razed by the government, a stressful and damaging experience for anyone, but perhaps particularly for indigenous communities, whose attachment to their land, their regions and their homes has been heightened by the nature of the prolonged violence in Guatemala prior to 1996.

In most cases, the threat of violence is the trigger for displacement, but in some instances individuals or families move ‘voluntarily’ and to locations they, rather than the government, choose when it becomes clear that the quantity and quality of land they need to re-establish their livelihoods will not be available. Whatever the trigger for movement, once families or communities move, they often experience considerable hardship, enduring similar or worse conditions in their relocation areas to those they faced at home, which may drive some members into secondary displacement.

Indigenous populations experience the same displacement patterns as non-indigenous ethnic groups, but are more vulnerable to state violence such as forced or

coerced displacement and to increased impacts from structural violence once displaced, because they are less able to secure employment given their relative lack of education and training. They are also more likely to be defrauded, abused and blackmailed, and find it harder to re-establish or build social networks.

Indigenous people make up 40 per cent of Guatemala's population, according to official statistics from 2012, but advocacy groups believe the true figure is as high as 60 per cent. Despite their number they are consistently and systematically discriminated against and suffer difficulties characteristic of disadvantaged minority groups worldwide. Indigenous people tend to be poorer and have less access to government services, and the data paints a stark picture of poverty and lack of opportunity (see table 6).<sup>51</sup>

Guatemala's indigenous people generally feel safest in their own communities, where they can maintain their social and cultural practices without being subject to discrimination. Once displaced, their social networks often rapidly fall apart, and the environment in which they are expected to live is often hostile. For these reasons, ethnic identity hinders rather than supports the displacement of individuals and communities. Indigenous people generally expect increased vulnerability when displaced, unless they move to areas that are largely indigenous. Even when a whole community is displaced together, its members may still quickly become affected by new challenges tied to limited natural resources.

Data consistently shows that indigenous people do not have the same access to goods, services or opportunities as other Guatemalan people. The post-civil war era has not inspired a constructive, trust-based relationship between the government and indigenous populations, whose objections to development projects that threaten their rural livelihoods have placed them in regular and direct opposition to the government. This latter has consistently discriminated against indigenous communities, and forcibly evicted them.

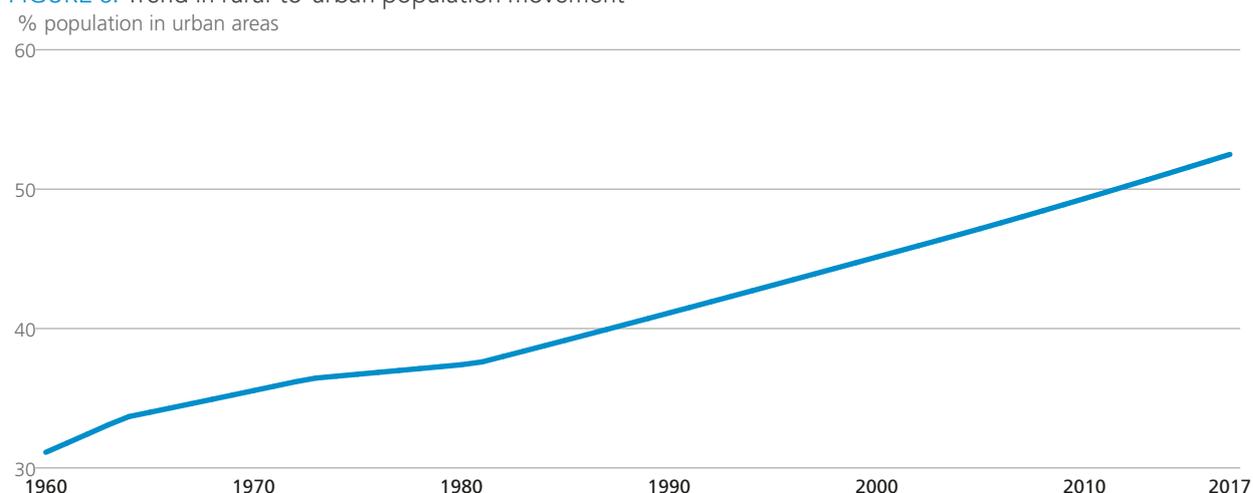
The vast majority of displacement in Guatemala is people moving from rural areas to urban population centres, which includes men, women and children forced off their land to make way for development projects. Statistics published in 2016 show that urbanisation in Guatemala has increased steadily in recent decades to the point that around 52 per cent of the population was living in urban areas in 2016 (see figure 6).<sup>52</sup> Many studies have concluded that Guatemala faces a number of pressing challenges as a result of unplanned and unsupported rural-to-urban displacement, including risks of greater impact from disasters and climate change.<sup>53</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that displacement from urban to rural areas is statistically significant.

**TABLE 6:** Key statistics for indigenous and non-indigenous populations

Issue	Statistics	Year of data and comments
<b>Proportion living below the poverty line</b>	80 per cent for indigenous people	2010, with almost no change since 2006 and no indication that the situation has since improved
	40 per cent for non-indigenous people	
<b>Chronic malnutrition among children</b>	69.9 per cent for indigenous children	2002
	35.7 per cent for non-indigenous children	
<b>Proportion of post-secondary students who are indigenous</b>	13.2 per cent	2002, from Human Security Index

Source: IPS News, "GUATEMALA: Forgotten Promises Leave Indigenous Peoples Poorer and Hungrier", December 2010

**FIGURE 6:** Trend in rural-to-urban population movement



Source: World Bank, using data from the United Nations Population Division. *World Urbanization Prospects: 2014 Revision*.

## I Displacement and crime

Organised crime is prevalent in Guatemala, and extortion is widespread, with more than 47,000 reported cases of the latter between 2008 and 2016. Even this figure, however, is likely to be dwarfed by the true number of incidents, as people either fear violence if they report attempts and incidences, or believe the police will not be interested or able to help.<sup>54</sup>

Gangs and organised crime groups also target people with threats to their lives, often tied to extortion, engagement in other crime or refusal to engage in criminal activity. This leads to displacement as people seek safe places, far from those who threaten to harm them. The same is true of other targeted threats and violence tied to people's actual or presumed activities. Such cases do not, however, account for the vast majority of internal displacement in Guatemala.

One impact of displacement on the people who move or are forced to move, is greater exposure to extortion and threats of extortion, as well as to other kinds of crime, including as perpetrators as well as victims.

In the case of extortion, the practice affects the entire country, but more than half of the cases registered were in Guatemala City and its surrounding areas (see table 7), with 69 per cent of reported incidents in the country as a whole taking place in its cities. By far the largest proportion of displacement in Guatemala is people moving to cities. The data suggests that people who have chosen to move in search of improved opportunities are often further victimised in the place they move to.

**TABLE 7:** Number of registered extortions by department (2008-2016)

Department	Reported extortion cases
Guatemala	26,771
Jutiapa	3,402
Jalapa	1,965
Chiquimula	1,848
Zacapa	1,507
Escuintla	1,225
Santa Rosa	1,224
Suchitepéquez	1,121
Retalhuleu	1,068
Quetzaltenango	1,055
San Marcos	1,050
Huehuetenango	883
Totonicapán	850
Alta Verapaz	808
Baja Verapaz	561
Izabal	470
Petén	382
Quiché	366
Sololá	346
Chimaltenango	344
Sacatepéquez	310
Progreso	240
<b>Total</b>	<b>47,796</b>

Source: *Report on the crime of extortion in Guatemala 2008-2016*, GAM-Guatemala

## | Gender

Domestic and gender-based violence are common in Guatemala. Few national statistics exist on domestic violence in the state, but data on femicide, which is often perpetrated by a conjugal partner, is becoming increasingly available: 711 cases were reported in 2016.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the frequency of violence in the home, however, women often lack the formal education, marketable employment skills, and in the case of indigenous women, also the necessary language skills, crucial to finding a job and a secure source of income if they leave home.

Domestic violence is also widely accepted in Guatemalan communities, meaning many women do not even consider moving as a result, and amongst those who do wish to leave their home, the fear of further violence and lack of support from friends and family members prevents them from doing so.

As a result of these economic and social factors, women are likely to remain in violent and dangerous conditions. Even those who do become displaced may be more vulnerable to violence than if they had remained.

## | LGBT people and other minorities

Guatemalan society is strongly influenced by the Catholic Church and tends to discriminate against people seen as not conforming with traditional values and ways of life. The LGBT community in Guatemala appears to be relatively small, but its members face ostracism and threats to their security, particularly in smaller communities. They tend to find that larger urban areas offer more safety and anonymity, and may “choose” displacement in an effort to protect themselves against discrimination, harassment and physical harm. Once again, however, we should note that the same threats from and of criminal activities, organised crime groups and gangs, including the risk of violence, apply to displaced members of the LGBT community as to any other displaced person in Guatemala, and that this risk is significantly increased if people know of their gender and/or sexual preferences.

## | Education and family breakdown and its links to displacement and violence

People’s ability to access education is both an impact and a cause of displacement in Guatemala.

Children and young people are often unable to access education. In the case of boys, this is commonly because they have to work in order to provide money for their families, while for girls and young people who are part of indigenous communities, families do not prioritise school attendance. There are strong suggestions that this is because of a lack of trust from parents that education will, in fact, help their children enter and succeed in the employment market.

One impact of this, however, is that children, and later adults, are more likely to become involved in crime in order to make money, or in the case of girls and women, enter relationships while still very young, and be particularly vulnerable to abuse. In both cases, these can be significant drivers of displacement.

Equally, many children who are displaced also cannot access education, for the reasons noted above. Once again, such children are also common and easy targets for gangs and organised crime groups, which recruit from a young age, and children in new environments, such as those who have been recently displaced, are more likely to engage in activities that would earn their families’ and communities’ disapproval.<sup>56</sup> This is particularly likely in places where social cohesion, which can itself be damaged by displacement is poor, leading to a lack of networks and low adherence to norms.

Another factor to consider is that children and young people often move in stages, first internally but with a view toward leaving the country. Many move alone, which leaves them highly vulnerable to victimisation, joining gangs, or being forced to engage with organised crime groups. Young men are often targeted and find that joining a gang is one of the only ways available to them to meet their basic needs. Girls and young women who face the threat of violence, including sexual violence, may seek protection from gang members who become their boyfriends.

Once a child or young person engages with a gang, their conditions change drastically, and may provoke

further displacement, if the person concerned falls foul of the group and its code of conduct, or attracts threats and violence from other groups because of their allegiance. Their ability to leave a gang or disengage from their relationship with a member is often limited at best, and any desire to do so may force them to move again. Depending on the reach of the gang in question, however, even further movement may not lead to safety, which makes it an option of last resort for many. These dynamics are identical in the case of organised crime groups, except that these groups tend to have much greater reach than gangs.

## | Secondary movements

As in the case of children and young people, all categories of displacement often lead to subsequent movements. In some cases, movement is planned as a staged process from internal displacement to crossing a border, but in many cases one internal movement is followed by another which was not part of the original plan. This is sometimes a result of direct threats of violence, but the main driver is often one or more forms of structural violence.

None of these trajectories are often caused by nationwide generalised violence. If anything, in fact, displacement feeds violence. Instead, structural violence or targeted violence are central factors in each of them.

## LINKS BETWEEN INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT AND CROSS-BORDER MOVEMENTS

The number of Guatemalans engaged in cross-border movement increased from 265,000 in 1990, to 980,000, or 5.7 per cent of the country's population of 17 million, in 2015. In the same year, 1.42 million people left El Salvador, 22.3 per cent of the country's population of 6.3 million, and 12,025,000 left Mexico, just over 9.4 per cent of the country's population of 127.5 million.<sup>57</sup>

There is a direct link between internal and cross-border displacement, with the former often a stepping stone to the latter. Participants in our study identified clear similarities between internal and cross-border movement in the search for better livelihoods and efforts to support family members left behind.<sup>58</sup> Cross-border displacement, however, requires resources many people do not

have. For those people, internal movement is seen as a way to securing funds required to leave the country for what are perceived as more lucrative opportunities.

While there is agreement that this appears to be a trend, there is no data with which to determine its statistical significance. It seems likely, however, that the number of people moving across borders is dwarfed by those moving internally, with urban areas as their destination.

Most cross-border displacement tends to involve children, adolescents and young people who leave the country alone rather than in family groups, which are more likely to move together internally. In part, this is because the costs of cross-border displacement are prohibitive for many people, which also makes those trying to leave the country vulnerable to becoming involved in gangs and organised crime groups. Participants in this study said criminal entities target areas of northern Guatemala near the border with Mexico, that are known departure points for those trying to leave the country. Returnees are also highly vulnerable to criminal entities and require protection.<sup>59</sup>

The proportion of those attempting cross-border displacement who are successful in establishing themselves abroad is not known, but those who try, whether for a first or subsequent time, are highly under-served by the state in terms of goods and services and extremely vulnerable to direct violence. Displacement is generally considered successful when people are able to reach their desired destination and contribute to the wellbeing of their families at home via remittances. Successful displacement is often followed by efforts to support other household members' movement in an attempt to reunify the family unit. These efforts are often illegal, meaning their family members are also exposed to the risks experienced by those who preceded them.

## 8

# KEY FINDINGS

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### | 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 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 than those they have left, with the added threat of direct violence and secondary displacement.

Direct violence does play a role in displacement, particularly when those targeted flee in fear of their personal safety. The number of people affected in this way is unclear. Extortion leads to displacement in some cases, most often when there are no alternatives to flight. 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 people demanding protection money.



*Kevin\* and his father talk to UNHCR about their new lives in northern Mexico, where he and his brother Jason\* are starting school again, having fled gang violence in Guatemala. Photo © UNHCR/Encarni Pindado, July 2018. \*Name changed*

## | 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 leave the areas to which they have been relocated. 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 opportunities to generate income inherent in displacement leads many of those affected to resort to criminal activity 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. Nor are all those involved in criminal activity are violent opportunists who prey on the vulnerable in society. Many see it as their only option.

## | Key finding 4: Sometimes displacement is the best option, but still unavailable to many

Displacement often has negative outcomes, such as overcrowded urban areas with limited resources and little support. In some cases, however, such as those involving 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.<sup>60</sup> 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.

# CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

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There are a series of clear factors that lead to internal displacement in Guatemala, but each alone has limited influence. People consider many elements before taking the decision to leave their homes and communities, on their own or with their families. The only exceptions are cases in which people experience direct, imminent threats and have resources to flee.

Contrary to the common perception encouraged by much of the media and many politicians in recent years, displacement is a last resort in response to dire circumstances. The choice to move, internally or internationally, comes with considerable risks and uncertainty. This study uses the term “displacement” to include all movement that has been triggered by a form of violence - direct or structural - because even in cases where there is a degree of agency or choice, it is very limited.

If no clear efforts are made to support communities in their current locations in order to reduce displacement and prevent it from happening in the future, rapid urbanisation is likely to lead to escalating challenges, including violence. Failure to harness the capacity of children, adolescents and young people will also hamper the country’s social and economic development.

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 following issues also need to be carefully examined and addressed as a matter of urgency:

- | Reducing unplanned urbanisation by ensuring the adequate provision of goods and services and enabling communities to sustain their livelihoods without having to uproot themselves.
- | Reducing displacement associated with slow-onset disasters by focusing on climate change, specifically on adaptation practices to address extreme drought, and ensuring that the protection of biospheres is inclusive of local populations
- | Supporting efforts to curb domestic and other forms of gender-based violence with tangible services that allow legislative mechanisms to be implemented effectively
- | Systematically collecting comprehensive data on internal displacement, as well as direct and structural violence as the basis for understanding and responding effectively to the challenges the phenomena pose at the individual, community and national level

In terms of violence specifically, the current dynamic in Guatemala should be understood as survival and coping strategies inextricably linked to limited opportunities. 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.

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59. In the case of returning minors the Secretariat for Social Welfare is tasked with the care, and service provision to children and minors; as well as with their reunification with families. However it is not possible to know which proportion of returning minors received the full support package (healthcare, schooling, adequate care while awaiting family reunification and reunification).
60. 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 that make up the country.



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