

# BALANCING IMMIGRATION PRESSURES WITH NATIONAL INTERESTS



Analysis and recommendations for  
Latin America Working Group

Developed by students of the  
American University  
School of International Service

Photo: Yuma Sector Border Patrol

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# Balancing National Priorities While Grappling with Immigration Pressures

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## **Shaping the Narrative to Highlight Immigrants' Positive Contributions**

***Many American policymakers spread harmful and untrue narratives about immigration and the contribution of immigrants to appeal to a frustrated voting base, but the positive contributions of immigrants have the potential to change the overall narrative on immigration.***

### **Driving Economic Growth and Strengthening Social Cohesion.**

A common, harmful misconception of immigration is that immigrants take up economic resources and burden taxpayers. This stereotype portrays immigrants as a drain on public services and social welfare systems, but research has shown that immigrants contribute significantly to the economy. Immigrants positively impact the labor market, including in critical sectors, such as infrastructure, agriculture, and healthcare. They also pay taxes and contribute to the buying and selling of goods and services. In fact, the majority of immigrants in the workforce contribute more in taxes than they receive in public benefits.

Regarding the purported strain on public welfare systems, research shows that in the short term, immigrants do not burden the American tax system any more than native-born citizens. However, the real benefits manifest in the long-term, as each generation expands upon familial wealth.

- The National Academy found that the net cost (social services minus taxes) from 2011 to 2013 for state and local budgets, combined, averaged \$1,600 a year for a first-generation immigrant. However, that figure became a net positive of \$1,700 for the second generation.

Economists argue that immigrants contribute to economic growth. They are often young, which helps to offset the costs of an aging population. Because of the lower birth rates in the United States, immigrants are increasingly needed to sustain a level of population growth for the U.S. economy to keep expanding. Studies show that native-born Americans are having fewer children, and the falling birth rate means that immigrants now make up a greater share of the population. Immigrants are a primary driver of the U.S. economy, and in 2030, they are projected to surpass U.S. births to relieve an impending labor shortage.

President-elect Donald Trump has spread harmful narratives that disparage migrants in public remarks, such as: “They’re not sending their best people,” “They’re poisoning the blood of our country,” and “They’re eating the cats and dogs.” This notion is rooted in deeply ingrained misconceptions that dehumanize individuals based on their immigration status. These narratives portray immigrants as criminals, free-riders, terrorists, and traffickers and perpetuate the false idea that they are inherently undeserving of dignity and respect. Furthermore, it ignores the complex realities of why people migrate, including fleeing violence, persecution, and poverty.

My research shows that in general, the entire immigrant population is increasingly better educated than native-born Americans and significantly enhance their communities.

- According to the Pew Research Center, immigrants are more likely to have jobs and are less likely to commit violent crimes. Regarding employment, nearly 64 percent of immigrants hold jobs, compared with roughly 60 percent of workers born in the United States, according to the Labor Department. Last year, immigrants accounted for roughly 40 percent of the 2.4 million jobs added.
- Furthermore, 16 percent of all immigrants who arrived since 2000 hold an advanced degree, compared with 13 percent of the native-born U.S. population, according to the Census Bureau. As of 2017, immigrants who have become citizens are almost twice as likely to hold a doctorate degree than native-born U.S. citizens.
- Sociologists Michael Light and Ty Miller found that a rising number of immigrants in the country illegally corresponded with a drop – not a rise – in reported crime, noting that such immigrants overwhelmingly arrived to work, a trend that helps reduce crime levels.
- Immigrants make positive contributions to society as community leaders, innovators, inventors, and visionaries. George Mason University found that since 1901, 148 immigrants have been Nobel Laureates, making lasting contributions across all six Nobel Prize fields, which will continue to benefit humankind for decades to come.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that LAWG:

- **Promote success stories.** Increase online activity to promote success stories of migrants through, for example, a weekly spotlight on an immigrant impact story. It is easier for the public to rally behind “micro-narratives” about individuals than to attempt to tackle daunting “macro-narratives” about geostrategic politics.
- **Expand partnerships with influence thinktanks** to produce work that showcases the benefits of immigration, including workshops and roundtable discussions, to engage influential and impactful thought leaders on the topic.
- **Rebut harmful narratives.** Monitor the harmful immigration policies that emerge from a second Trump Administration. Provide fast thinking analyses that challenge Trump’s policies while the debate is fresh and navigate the political agendas behind the rhetoric to expose the truth and rise above counterproductive political debate.

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## Addressing Immigration Court Backlog and Tackling Detention Center Failures

*The immigration court backlog prolongs detention for hundreds of thousands of intending migrants, worsening conditions like inadequate healthcare, abuse and limited legal aid. While addressing this requires increased funding, there should be a focus on prioritizing community-based alternatives to detention and improving detention facilities with better healthcare and access to legal representation.*

### Immigration Crisis: Prolonged Backlogs and the Human Cost of Detention

The U.S. immigration system is burdened by a court backlog, leading to prolonged detention for thousands of immigrants. According to Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, the delay reached an all-time high in 2024, as the average wait time for a court hearing is five years with the number of cases exceeding 3 million.

The states experiencing the largest backlog are Florida, Texas, California, and New York, with the number of cases ranging from 100,000 to 300,000.

- The biggest contributing factor to the backlog is the lack of immigration judges and poor work management, according to the Migration Policy Institute. Immigration judges average 4,500 pending cases, which shows the necessity of hiring more judges and opening more immigration courts.

The immigration court backlog is due mostly to budget restraints. The Biden administration has asked Congress to commit \$1.45 billion to the court system, which would reflect a 70 percent increase over last year's budget of \$860 million. Instead, Congress trimmed the budget to \$844 million.

Delays in the court system keep individuals in facilities notorious for substandard living conditions, including insufficient medical care, overcrowding, and limited access to legal resources.

- According to Freedom for Immigrants, there are tens of thousands of immigrants in detention centers, with Texas, Louisiana, California, Georgia and Arizona leading in the number of immigrants detained.
- There have been reports of detainees being ignored when asking for medical help, not having open wounds treated, and medical diagnoses not being disclosed to them and left untreated.
- Additionally, studies have shown that detained individuals are nearly **five times less likely** to obtain legal counsel compared to those not in detention. This disparity is critical, as having legal representation greatly increases the likelihood of a positive outcome in removal proceedings, including seeking asylum or other forms of protection.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has released a report after an inspection of 17 detention facilities conducted in Fiscal Years 2020-2023, concluding that ICE is hindered in its ability to maintain a safe and secure environment for staff and detainees. DHS has found that there were struggles to comply with medical care standards in all locations and that 87 percent of locations are deficient in communication practices, with private prisons being in worse conditions than ICE facilities.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Increased funding would help remedy all of these problems but appears unlikely to materialize. There are affordable measures, however, that the U.S. government could take to begin to address them.

Ideally, LAWG would advocate for the following measures to tackle these issues:

**Nationalized Standards for Detention Centers:** Detention centers are inconsistent in their standards, with significant discrepancies in the quality of care and treatment. Without national standards, many facilities fail to meet basic humanitarian expectations. There should be a push for unified national standards for both ICE facilities and private facilities.

**Mandatory Recommendations from Oversight Agencies:** Oversight bodies, such as the DHS Inspector General, have not consistently provided actionable recommendations following their inspections, allowing ICE to avoid addressing reported issues. Providing recommendations will force ICE to address the issue while holding them accountable.

**Alternatives to Detention Centers:** Alternatives to detention, such as community-based programs, have shown success in other countries by being both cost-effective and humane. These programs maintain oversight through case management and community support, yielding high compliance rates with immigration proceedings. Human Rights Watch found that in Bulgaria, Poland, and Cyprus, 86 percent of participants in community-based programs who are placed in government sponsored housing continued attending required court meetings, while the cost of these programs is only \$9 per day.

## **Bridging Gaps in Resettlement and Reintegration Processes in the U.S.**

***A critical aspect of the U.S. immigration system requiring immediate attention is the resettlement and deportation processes following court proceedings. Refugees and asylees approved to remain in the country often face difficulties accessing basic services such as healthcare, education, and employment due to the lack of consistent national standards for resettlement programs. Also, the absence of a practical approach to deportee reintegration exposes deportees to dangerous living conditions in their home countries.***

Inadequate funding for resettlement programs for those approved by the courts to remain in the United States as refugees or asylees severely limits access to essential services like housing, employment, education, and healthcare.

- According to the Migration Policy Institute, the U.S. resettlement program has been receiving insufficient financial support, which has made it even more difficult to support the increasing number of refugees who need housing and employment services.
- According to a report by Refugees International, more than 40% of asylees surveyed reported that their housing did not meet their family's needs. In the DC area, 75 percent of respondents had to share housing due to affordability issues, while those in Houston were more likely to receive financial assistance to secure housing.
- While refugees have higher initial employment rates compared to other immigrant groups due to government-funded job placement services, their employment prospects decline over time. Analysis of the New Immigrant Survey reveals that five years after resettlement, refugees experience a drop in employment.
- According to the International Rescue Committee and National Public Radio, employment opportunities for migrants are constrained due to insufficient funding for language training programs. One example is in Massachusetts, where over 20,000 migrants are unable to access English language courses due to the overburdened system.

Inconsistent policies across agencies make these challenges harder to deal with. The Government Accountability Office has reported that the lack of standardized procedures for resettlement creates disparities in service delivery, impeding coordination between agencies.

- According to Deloitte Insights, strategic coordination and communication across organizations providing services is often lacking, and efforts tend to be reactive and duplicative. Federal agencies, state agencies, and resettlement organizations are responsible for different facets of the refugee process; when these participating agencies do not adequately share information and coordinate their activities effectively, it further strains the resettlement process.

- According to a report by Congressional Research Service, weak coordination between the Department of State and the Department of Health and Human Services has resulted in inefficient resettlement efforts. Information sharing between agencies is insufficient, leading to gaps in addressing refugee needs and hindering the proper allocation of resources. This lack of transparency and interagency coordination delays effective resettlement services.

Deportees returning to their home countries also are in need of more attention and support.

- Many deportees face stigma, violence, and economic instability. In Central American countries, for example, deportees are at increased risk of gang violence due to perceived associations with foreign countries. Lacking transitional support, deportees struggle to secure stable employment and thus a stable lifestyle.
- The absence of mental health services also severely impacts the reintegration issue, as many deportees have trauma and return to environments with limited psychological or social support.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Increased funding would help remedy all of these problems but appears unlikely to materialize. There are affordable measures, however, that the U.S. government could take to begin to address them. So, ideally, LAWG would advocate for the following measures to tackle these issues.

**Accountability and Standardized Policies:** Implement clear systems for tracking funds and establish national standards for the programs. This would ensure consistency in services across states, minimize disparities, and enhance transparency, fostering accountability in both financial management and refugee support.

**Increase Public Knowledge:** Launch targeted campaigns to increase public knowledge of the challenges faced by refugees and deportees, building support for policy reform and funding increases.

**Advocate for More Transitional Support for Deportees:** Collaborate with international organizations and NGOs to provide reintegration resources for deported individuals and press receiving countries for fair treatment guarantees. Due to the impracticality of U.S. government involvement, promoting international collaboration on these issues would be a better approach.

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## Confronting the Real Threats on the Border

***Immigrants and asylees are not a threat to national security; fentanyl, the trafficking of persons for exploitation, and terrorism are. The real perpetrators of these threats are cartels and American citizens.***

Fentanyl is a synthetic drug made using precursor material produced in China. These precursors are smuggled into Mexico by cartels. These drugs are then smuggled in small quantities into the United States by drug mules.

- From 2021 to 2023 fentanyl killed 203,845 Americans, according to the DEA. In 2023, for the first time, there were fewer fentanyl deaths than the previous year, down by 15,000.
- Cartels choose mules who would not raise suspicion at the border. They tend not to pick migrants or potential asylees, as they already raise suspicion. According to an NPR report, half of all mules running fentanyl are American citizens.
- In 2023, President Xi and Biden met, and President Xi committed that China would put more pressure on Chinese fentanyl precursor manufacturers. Since last year's meeting, China has appeared to be putting pressure on precursor manufacturers.

The forced trafficking of people is a major problem in the United States. Victims come from vulnerable populations, like those who live in border communities. Cartels see trafficking as a lucrative source of income especially the trafficking of women and children to use in the sex trade; men tend to be trafficked for labor. There is an unknown number of trafficking victims in the United States.

- There is no national database of trafficking victims; nonprofits are the most reliable sources. According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, in 2020-2023 there were 65,990 victims of trafficking identified in the United States.
- Trafficked victims are often fearful of law enforcement and are afraid of the potential consequences they may face. They also tend not to know what rights they have under U.S. law, with some believing they have no rights. This makes them unwilling to report abuses they have suffered.
- Unfortunately, the number of victims has remained steady through the past few years, averaging around 16,000 per year.

There has been an increase in the number of encounters by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) of people between ports of entry on the terrorist watchlist since 2021. Concerns have been raised that terrorists are using the southern border to sneak into the United States.

- According to CBP, there were 15 encounters between ports of entry at the southern border in 2021, 98 in 2022, 169 in 2023, and 103 in 2024, which is against the average of around three per year in the preceding four years.

- The DHS does not release criteria for how a person ends up on the terrorist watchlist. It is not known if any encounters were actual terrorists or people on the watchlist because of familial relations, or even the case of someone sharing a name with a person on the watchlist, among any other number of reasons.
- Being on the terrorist watchlist does not make a person a terrorist. Conservative groups have pushed a narrative, using the CBP data, to demonize immigrants and asylees further by equating them to terrorists and criminals. With the recent election win for Donald Trump, this narrative will not go away soon.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Fentanyl, forced trafficking, and terrorists are real threats to national security but casting migrants as a threat to national security is wrong and can draw resources away from actual national security threats.

We recommend the following proposals or actions to LAWG in relation to fentanyl, forced trafficking, and claims of terrorism at the border.

- Fentanyl: **Advocate for the incoming Trump administration to continue cooperating with China in stopping the flow of precursors.** Aggressive actions toward China could cause them to drop their commitment to crack down on companies that manufacture precursors. Also, express to the public that the drug mules are not immigrants or asylees but primarily American citizens. It should also be noted that the demand for fentanyl comes from American users.
- Forced Human Trafficking: **Advocate for the creation of a national database of people who have been trafficked.** This will finally allow for the full scope of the problem to be understood. Recommend that the database have reporting requirements for the federal, state, and even local level. Ensure that the privacy of individuals on the list is respected. Ideally, the victims on the database would be available to automatically receive a T visa.
- Claims of Terrorism at the Border: **Advocate for reform for the watchlist to remove people's names who do not belong** and ensure that those who remain are done so with a high burden of evidence.

## **Cartels Use American Weapons to Terrorize Communities**

***Firearms are smuggled into Mexico by U.S. citizen couriers because of the ease of purchasing guns and the lack of law enforcement against illegal gun purchasers in the United States. These weapons arm the drug cartels that terrorize Mexican and Central American communities—a major driver of migration.***

U.S. intelligence sources report cartel gun-running networks, structured like terrorist cells, recruit Americans to purchase firearms from gun stores, gun shows, and online dealers nationwide. These weapons are then smuggled across the southwest border via a network of brokers and couriers.

The unrestricted movement of American guns across the southern border, due to the lack of enforcement of U.S. law, enables cartels to defend their drug operations and overpower Mexican authorities.

- According to a State Department official, guns at ports of entry are shipped in containers that are not thoroughly searched by the recipient country due to understaffing or corruption.
- Cartels have a widespread impact on Mexican and Central American societies as these weapons continue to be smuggled southbound, where they engage in numerous illegal activities beyond drug trafficking, eroding human rights, and undermining institutional stability through widespread violence.
- According to a Mexican government lawsuit against U.S. gun manufacturers in U.S. Circuit Court (Estados Unidos Mexicanos, Plaintiff, vs. Smith & Wesson Brands, Inc., etc.), “a staggering 873,000 guns currently are trafficked annually into Mexico from the U.S.”

## **Trust Between Mexico and the United States Needs to be Rebuilt**

- According to Pro Publica, Mexican authorities are forcibly transporting tens of thousands of migrants by bus from the U.S. border to southern Mexico. In the first nine months of 2024, over 60,000 migrants have been relocated from various regions in Mexico.
- Senior U.S. and Mexican officials attribute the significant drop in illegal crossings at the U.S. southwest border to increased bussing efforts, strengthened enforcement cooperation between the two countries, and new asylum restrictions introduced by the Biden administration.
- The Mexican government has placed a strong emphasis on our mutual border security by bussing migrants away from the U.S.-Mexico border. This recent bussing initiative could potentially help begin to repair U.S.-Mexican cooperation on mutual border since Genaro García Luna, Mexico’s former Secretary of Public Security, was found guilty by a New York jury in 2023 for accepting millions of dollars in bribes to shield the violent Sinaloa cartel. García Luna is the highest-ranking Mexican official to be convicted in the

United States. His cooperation with the cartels helped to sow severe U.S. distrust with the former AMLO administration.

- The newly elected Sheinbaum Pardo Administration can increase U.S.-Mexican cooperation on security issues to continue to repair the bilateral relationship between the two countries. The two nations can increase their efforts to limit the financial access of the multibillion-dollar criminal enterprises that channel funds through both U.S. and Mexican banking systems. Restoring intelligence sharing and conducting joint operations with specialized units would foster trust between the countries.
- It is important to note the challenges under the new Trump Administration, which proposed plans to “wage war” on Mexican cartels, likening them to ISIS. Their proposals include bombing fentanyl labs, deploying special forces to target drug lords, imposing naval blockades, and conducting cyberattacks.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that LAWG consider focusing its efforts to address the specific issues regarding guns, cartels, and the areas of opportunities with the new U.S. and Mexico presidential administrations.

- Guns: **Advocate for the U.S. to enforce laws regarding the purchase and export of weapons to ensure that firearms are not purchased under false pretenses.** It is the United States’ jurisdiction to monitor and curb illegal gun purchases, according to the ATF.
- Cartels: **Promote that the U.S. Embassy/Consulates in Mexico consider creating programming to lower Cartel recruitment.** This capacity-building programming would circumvent some of Mexico’s bureaucratic inefficiencies since addressing recruitment demands structural efforts at both state and local levels and should be added to the new bilateral agreement. It is essential to provide educational and professional opportunities surpassing cartels’ short-term advantages, according to Science Adviser Magazine.
- Newly Elected Administrations: **Encourage the new Trump Administration to consider reviving formal bilateral working groups with the Sheinbaum Administration.** The working groups would address shared mutual border security goals and try to meet objectives to enhance their security framework, broadening the scope and ambition of bilateral programs to increase safety for citizens on both sides of the border. This should be executed while discouraging the Trump Administration from sending U.S. troops to intervene within sovereign Mexican territory to reduce cartel power and influence.

## **Avoiding International Mistakes by Addressing Domestic Needs**

***Unaddressed concerns about socio-economic issues lead to public support for isolationist policies that deter and expel migrants, despite migrants' positive contributions. Such anti-immigrant policies have detrimental effects on labor markets, international cooperation, and human rights.***

In the last decade, public policies in many European and Asian countries have adopted a negative stance toward immigration because of social anxieties that preexist the arrival of migrants but are nevertheless commonly attributed to them.

Effective migration policy requires international coordination and regional leadership, as demonstrated in the European Union:

- During the 2015 European migrant crisis, Germany under Angela Merkel welcomed all Syrian refugees. Influenced by Germany's leadership, members of the EU collaborated to enforce the rules codified by the Dublin Regulation. This ensured a capacity-based distribution of migrants across all member states.
- In contrast, Germany's government today has pivoted to an isolationist approach designed to reduce migration. Border control has been implemented at all international borders, undermining the bloc's free movement of persons and goods.

## **Social Anxiety and the Migrant Blame Game**

As noted by the Council on Foreign Relations, anti-incumbent sentiment is currently widespread in many countries. Incumbents, responsible for the policy failures that lie at the root of social anxiety, are often replaced by right-leaning politicians promising to "fix" everything. In the Netherlands, Italy, and Germany, conservative populists made significant gains in recent elections. These new politicians usher in a wave of nationalism that blames migrants for many of the issues causing social anxiety.

- The Netherlands has a significant housing crisis and lingering inflation. Housing is scarce and taking out a mortgage has become unaffordable for first-time buyers.
- In Europe and especially in Asia, population decline has led to extreme labor shortages in rural manufacturing and healthcare. Reduced production drives prices up. Nevertheless, to preserve a supposed cultural homogeneity, migrants are deterred.

These East Asian countries miss out on readily available migration. Most migration in Asia is labor migration, but as many as 10 million migrants from countries, such as Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Indonesia prefer to stay within Southeast Asia according to the International Labor Organization. This is because the barriers to migrate to East Asia are high. Japan has very restrictive migration policies, and South Korea is notorious for allowing poor working conditions and lower pay for migrants.

- Recognizing the need for more foreign labor, some business owners in Japan have been asking the government to incentivize immigration by allowing family reunification and creating a pathway to permanent residency. In South Korea, advocacy groups are calling for stronger migrant worker protections.
- Despite this, public opinion remains concerned with the threat migrants perceivably pose to the labor market rather than the advantages. “They’re stealing jobs” often translates to, “Our culture is under threat.”

Governments have failed to build enough shelter for migrants. In the Netherlands, asylee processing centers are operating above capacity, with migrants sleeping outside. In Japan, police found Vietnamese labor migrants living together in quarters much too small to accommodate such large groups of people. The images of migrants living outside, disseminated across various media channels, contribute to the public perception that their country is “full,” even if the resources do exist to take in more people.

Since Germany’s shift to more hardline immigration policies, European countries have followed suit by abandoning multilateral solutions. The Netherlands and Hungary have already indicated they wish to partially suspend asylum law and opt out of European-level programs aimed at cooperation. But unilateral action leads to harm for migrants:

- In the UK, the death of a Vietnamese migrant placed the country’s immigration policy under scrutiny. Human rights experts point to the resilience of human smugglers: unilateral policy leads to cracks, which are quickly exploited by smugglers.
- The UK, the Netherlands, and Italy have all developed plans to deport irregular migrants to third-party countries (Rwanda, Uganda, and Albania respectively). Courts at the national and European levels have ruled that Italy’s deportation of migrants to Albania constitute human rights violations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Ideally, LAWG would consider pursuing the following:

- Advocate that lawmakers **address the economic concerns** of U.S. voters.
- Partner with human rights-oriented representatives from the private sector to list **immigration policies important to business leaders**.
- Draft a statement **strongly rejecting the deportation of refugees** to dangerous countries.
- Develop a plan to be presented to state-level leaders that outlines **a comprehensive migrant distribution plan**, considering states’ needs and capacities. The European example shows that when states let anti-immigrant sentiment move them to act unilaterally, the situation becomes worse for migrants and the domestic economy. This plan would prevent the harm caused by U.S. states acting in an uncoordinated manner.

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## **Harnessing Successful European and Northeast Asian Immigration Strategies**

***Addressing socioeconomic concerns harmonizes immigrant and native populations. European and Northeast Asian countries that are media literate and have a lenient, but structured, immigration system have succeeded in maintaining overall good relations between native-born and immigrant groups. The United States could take inspiration from these countries to protect its borders and promote responsible migration.***

### **Integration as a Response to Migration Challenges**

Since 2008, several European and East Asian countries have tried to implement immigration policies to tackle growing migration caused by wars, natural disasters, economic challenges and climate crisis. According to Reuters, in 2015 over a million people migrated to Europe seeking asylum or economic migration due to the Syrian civil war and Boko Haram in West Africa. Migration to Europe continues in large numbers due to disasters like the 2022 Pakistan flood.

Immigration laws differ by country because the underlying motives to welcome migrants differ. Some officials and NGOs in South Korea have expressed the desire to accept migrants into their society and provide them with rights to fill labor gaps with a young labor base that will provide a much-needed boost to the economy. Other countries have passed critical laws promoting integration and multiculturalism for social cohesion.

Our research shows that countries that teach media literacy are more resistant to false narratives about migration. Finland regularly rises to the top as one of the most resilient European countries against misinformation. Anti-migration narratives made fewer inroads in European countries with better developed media and information literacy educational programs.

An important factor for migrant populations is the degree to which the government of their country of residence pursues integration of their community. Spain used to be an emigrant country, but now it is an immigrant country. The government recognized the tax potential of undocumented immigrants, the benefits of a young labor market and the long-term benefits of multiculturalism to their country. These are the policies they followed:

- Spain created an immigration path to citizenship based on civic behavior, economic stability and some degree of cultural assimilation. In 2023, the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security, and Migration passed a strategic framework to help municipalities with large immigrant communities create plans for integration and anti-racism and prevent xenophobia. Spain's education system promotes the benefits of a multicultural society.

Portugal is another country that works toward integrating migrants for similar reasons as Spain. The government integrates existing communities by increasing accessibility to online governmental resources and intercultural dialogue. Portugal's High Commission for

Migration working together with local governments integrated migrants into the labor market and reduced poverty rates among migrants of the global south.

The OECD projects that Portugal's working-age population will decrease from 64 percent to 54.2 percent in 2060, which is lower than its counterparts. To mitigate this decrease in the labor market, the Portuguese government has increased programs to ease recruitment processes for foreign workers.

- The Portuguese government has increasingly boosted efforts to retain foreign talent by funding Portuguese language, vocational and citizenship training programs. The government has created a job-seeker visa that allows the holder to remain in Portugal while seeking employment.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend LAWG take into consideration the following recommendations:

Ideally, LAWG would lobby for the **Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Act** to be reintroduced in the Senate and support its legislative process. LAWG could advocate NGOs to push for media literacy campaigns.

Ideally, LAWG would partner with the Department of Education to help migrants better integrate into American society by expanding **vocational, language, cultural, and citizen training** programs.

Ideally, LAWG would organize a conference with key government agencies, industry leaders, and cultural organizations in a U.S. state with a significant immigrant population. The aim is to foster collaboration between federal, state, and local governments, as well as migration and cultural organizations. The objective is to promote **multiculturalism** and create a model of **employment programs** to **ease recruitment** for migrants.

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## **Reform Safety Policies: Lessons from El Salvador**

***Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele's mano dura crackdown, aimed at mitigating gang violence, has broad societal appeal but high costs to human rights and individual liberties. The United States, alongside international and regional organizations, can craft a solution that balances safety efforts with preserving human dignity.***

From 6,657 homicides in 2015 to 154 in 2023, El Salvador's reputation of violence is dwindling; however, a new reputation of a prison state is replacing the former. An estimated 80,000 people in a country of 6.3 million are currently imprisoned due to Bukele's *mano dura* policy: his proclaimed "war on gangs." Much of Bukele's appeal comes from his lay approach to giving speeches and the timely deliverance of his promises.

Five years after Bukele first took office, he won an unprecedented and previously unconstitutional second term with 84.6 percent of the vote, according to the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. Bukele ran both terms on a far-right political party he created – *Nuevas Ideas*. *Mano dura* policy is not exclusive to El Salvador; it has been enacted in several LAC countries and even the Philippines. As the name of his political party implies, Bukele has a novel approach to *mano dura* policy.

The Bukele model includes:

- Mass arrests based on gang-affiliated tattoos, suspected gang involvement, and the harboring of gang members, among many other "offenses."
- Military involvement in policing.
- A "state of exception," which temporarily suspends constitutional rights with the goal of making detention of suspected criminals easier.

### **Safety Sacrifices Individual Liberties**

Such a substantial decrease in homicides and other violent crimes is a feat that most countries, especially LAC countries, can only wish for. The desire for enhanced safety needs to be accomplished by other means. Bukele has violated civil liberties by implementing detention without trial, suspending a fair-trial corpus, and committing abuses within the prison system, such as overcrowding and providing inhuman conditions for inmates. He has also infringed upon privacy rights by using surveillance technology and data collection, as well as conducting unwarranted searches in civilian homes. Stories have arisen of young men fleeing the country due to fear of unjust incarceration.

A top-down approach in which international organizations, such as the Organization of American States (OAS), craft a guideline for recommended qualitative-data-based policies combating violence is the solution to this issue. In addition to crafting a guideline, prohibiting fundamental human rights violations, such as the suspension of constitutional rights, would allow for safety measures to be imposed while setting up checks and

balances on individual power. The OAS has a “Democracy Charter,” which could be more rigorously implemented.

Individual LAC countries, alongside their respective regional organizations, such as CARICOM and SICA, could then use these policies to come to a sensible and contextualized approach to mitigating gang violence. This initiative could be called *mano firme* policy. An integral part of *mano firme* would also be to encourage these crime-affected countries to invest in regional development, education, and economic opportunities to reduce the pressures of migration.

Nayib Bukele has the influence and potential to transform his model along these lines and evolve it into a more nuanced approach that benefits both citizens and migrants alike. President Donald Trump’s recent reelection may even be beneficial to the cause, as he and Bukele have shown mutual support for one another.

Latin American migration to the United States is often provoked by insecurity, unstable education, and economic hardship. More initiative taken to tackle these issues internally lessens the need for migration. By understanding the societal appeal that the “Bukele model” and other *mano dura* policies have, international organizations can craft a solution that fulfills those needs whilst also respecting one’s right to liberty.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that LAWG pursue the following:

- LAWG should **call on appropriate international and regional organizations** to develop *mano firme*-like policies that put human rights and the rule of law, including respect for the Constitution, first, while also addressing the need for enhanced safety.
  - Policymakers, both in El Salvador and internationally, should **pursue systems that prioritize human dignity** while addressing safety concerns.
- LAWG should **highlight case studies** of countries that have mitigated violence without infringing on human rights.

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## Addressing Irregular Migration in Latin America: Beyond the Bukele Model

***The Salvadoran Government has claimed — and data from the United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP) so far confirms — that the Bukele Model has significantly reduced irregular migration. However, this model is unlikely to be sufficient in decreasing irregular migration in the long term without investing in a comprehensive approach that tackles all primary drivers of migration in a sustainable manner.***

The CBP has reported a 50 percent reduction in encounters with Salvadoran nationals at the U.S.-Mexico border from 2022 to 2024. However, these numbers do not tell the entire story as Mexico has seen an increase in interactions with Salvadoran migrants.

- According to Mexico's refugee processing agency, refugee applications from Salvadorans in 2024 rose by 10.4 percent compared to 2023. Subsequently, encounters with Salvadorans in Mexico surged, with 33,292 encounters between January and May of 2024, compared to 24,182 recorded for the total year of 2023.

These trends suggest that while fewer Salvadorans are reaching the U.S. border, many are seeking refuge or being intercepted within Mexico.

Primary drivers of migration from El Salvador include violence, corruption, poverty, and poor education. While a significant reduction in violence has occurred, other primary drivers in El Salvador persist. The Bukele administration has yet to implement a formal plan to address these drivers.

### Corruption:

- Under the state of exception, innocent individuals have been arrested, with many of them being young males from poor communities.
- According to Transparency International, El Salvador scored 31 out of 100 points on the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index. This highlights how El Salvador still faces challenges in attracting investors, which is critical for job growth, due to government corruption.

### Poverty:

- According to the World Bank's 2024 Report, nearly one-third of the population lives in poverty. El Salvador's economy faces structural challenges, such as low productivity and human capital deficiencies, stemming from malnutrition and inadequate schooling levels.
- The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification states that 45 percent of the population lives with moderate food insecurity while 16 percent live with severe food insecurity.

## Education:

- El Salvador struggles with poor infrastructure, insufficient educational budgets, and children of poor families leaving school to work. Bukele's *Mi Nueva Escuela* plan, which aims to allocate over \$289 million to construct 5,000 education centers, has faced criticism for its slow implementation since its 2021 launch.

## **Challenges to Emulating the Bukele Approach Elsewhere**

Politicians across Latin America, including Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, Brazil, and Peru, have shown interest in replicating Bukele's approach to combat gang violence. However, these countries must consider that context-specific factors allowed El Salvador to conduct nationwide mass arrests with little retaliation from the gangs. Failed attempts at executing Bukele's approach elsewhere could spiral into greater violence and increased migration. Latin American countries interested in adopting the Bukele model may encounter the following challenges.

- Population Size: El Salvador's smaller population and land area made mass arrests quicker and simpler to execute. Countries with larger populations and land areas would face greater challenges in executing nationwide mass arrests.
- Dismantlement of democratic checks and balances: Countries that lack authoritarianism will have difficulty executing a state of exception without Congressional resistance.
- Power: While gangs in El Salvador were strong in many localities, they were less powerful in comparison to drug cartels and organized criminal networks found elsewhere in Latin America, such as in Mexico, Brazil, and Peru.

Therefore, if the U.S. government is interested in the long-term reduction of irregular migration from Latin America – including El Salvador – it should support the region in addressing corruption, lack of economic opportunities, and poor education. Tackling these issues is more likely to provide lasting stability for the region.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

We recommend that LAWG pursue the following:

- Release an official report analyzing how the Bukele model is insufficient in sustainably addressing irregular migration from Latin America in the long term.
- Collaborate with partners to advocate for the State Department to publicly condemn the human rights violations committed under the Bukele administration.
- Urge the State Department to pressure El Salvador to revive the International Commission against Impunity as well as encourage Honduras to revive the Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity.