



TABLE 2. Unaccompanied Immigrant Children Released to Sponsors in Gulf South States⁴

STATE	FY 2014	FY 2015	FY 2016*
Alabama	786	808	670
Florida	5,445	2,908	3,851
Louisiana	1,755	480	663
Mississippi	290	207	239
Texas	7,409	3,272	4,738
GULF SOUTH TOTAL	15,685	7,675	10,161
US TOTAL	53515	27840	37574

* Through June 30, 2016

The Zetas, a violent transnational criminal organization from Mexico, appear to be consolidating control over local police and the military in Guatemala,⁵ and four Northern Triangle cities—San Salvador, Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, and Guatemala City—recently were ranked among the top five most murderous metropolises in the world.⁶ Family sponsors in Gulf South states have received over a quarter of unaccompanied minor children in FY 2014, FY 2015, and FY 2016 through June 2016. (See Table 2.)⁷

It might be tempting to shrug our shoulders and say it is up to Northern Triangle countries to solve their own problems, but to do so would require denying incontrovertible historical evidence that the U.S. has long played a role in undermining democracy and economic and social stability in the region. A case in point is the CIA orchestrated coup in Guatemala in 1954 that led to a long and deadly civil war from which the country has yet to recover.

HISTORY OF 1954 GUATELMALAN COUP D'ETAT

Following the "October Revolution" of 1944, led by Guatemalan university students and middle-class citizens greatly influenced by Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs, the repressive regime of Dictator Federico Ponce

After the "surge" in the number of unaccompanied immigrant children and immigrant families crossing the border dominated headlines in the summer of 2014, the Mexican government, at the urging of the United States, began apprehending and deporting more migrants in Mexico and cracking down on the use of Mexican freight trains (*la Bestia*) as a method of transportation.¹ Although the number of Central American children and families (largely composed of women and children) apprehended at the border dropped precipitously in FY 2015, it began climbing again in FY 2016 (see Table 1) as flexible and opportunistic smuggling rings developed new routes to exploit. More importantly, conditions that cause children and families to flee the Northern Triangle countries (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) have not improved since 2014; if anything, levels of violence are worse. The murder rate in El Salvador has increased 200 percent since a 2012 truce negotiated between rival gangs began to break down.²

TABLE 1. Unaccompanied Immigrant Children (UIC) and Immigrant Families* (IF) Apprehended at Border by Fiscal Year³

	FY 2013		FY 2014		FY 2015		FY 2016**	
	UIC	IF	UIC	IF	UIC	IF	UIC	IF
El Salvador	5,990	NA***	16,404	NA	9,389	10,872	12,800	18,225
Guatemala	8,068	NA	17,057	NA	13,589	12,820	13,755	14,732
Honduras	6,747	NA	18,244	NA	5,409	10,671	7,058	13,006
TOTAL	20,805	NA	51,705	NA	28,387	34,363	33,613	45,963

* Number of immigrant families represents number of individuals in all apprehended family units (children under 18 and parent or legal guardian).

** Through June 30, 2016.

*** U.S. did not begin tracking number of apprehended families as distinct from other migrants until FY 2015.

was overthrown, with fewer than 100 lives lost. Soon a philosophy professor with moderate political views, Juan José Arévalo, well-known to the teachers who formed the backbone of the revolutionary movement for his patriotic textbooks on Guatemala, won the first free and fair election in Guatemalan history.⁸

When Arévalo took office in March, 1945, he was confronted by an impoverished country that had changed little since achieving independence from Spain in 1821. Seventy-two percent of the land was owned by two percent of the landowners. Indigenous people in the countryside were forced to work 150 days a year for large plantations at no pay. Life expectancy for indigenous people was only 40 years, versus just 50 years for ladinos (persons of native and European ancestry who had adopted a westernized culture). Most workers were employed by foreign-owned companies, with the largest number—40,000—employed directly or indirectly by United Fruit Company, an American owned corporation headquartered in New Orleans which grew bananas throughout Central America and the Caribbean for export to the U.S. and Europe.⁹

Arévalo's administration approved the country's first social security law, modeled after FDR's New Deal measures, guaranteeing workers the right to safe working conditions, compensation for injuries, maternity benefits, and basic education and health care. Dozens of medical facilities were built throughout the country to serve peasants living outside the capital city. The Labor Code passed in 1947 instituted a minimum wage and guaranteed urban workers the right to organize.¹⁰

When Jacobo Árbenz Guzman was elected president in a largely free election in 1951, agricultural workers earned an average of \$87 a year and were 90 percent of the workforce. Of the four million acres owned by large plantation owners, less than one fourth was under cultivation.¹¹ Árbenz promised not only to expand the reforms begun under Arévalo, but also to reform Guatemala's semi-feudal agricultural practices. His agrarian reform bill, Decree 900, expropriated all uncultivated land from large landholdings, compensating owners at the value the owners had declared in tax returns. By June, 1954, approximately one-sixth of the population (500,000 people) had received 1.4 million acres of land.¹² Although many landowners were affected, the main target of Decree 900 was the United Fruit Company, by far the largest property owner in the country. By February, 1954, 386,901 acres, or 70 percent of the company's landholdings, were expropriated and given to landless peasants.¹³

Accustomed to pliant Guatemalan dictators who had granted the company massive concessions, the United Fruit Company responded to the reforms of the Arévalo and Árbenz administrations by launching an intensive lobbying and public relations effort to convince U.S. government officials and the U.S. public that the Guatemalan government needed to be replaced because it had been infiltrated by Communists and was anti-American.¹⁴

In August, 1953, in the throes of Cold War McCarthyism, President Dwight Eisenhower authorized the CIA to overthrow the democratically elected government of Jacobo Árbenz. His Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, and his brother, CIA director Allen Dulles, had close ties to the United Fruit Company through a law firm for which they had both worked, and were eager to challenge threats to U.S. national security interests, which they conflated with the interests of United Fruit Company.¹⁵

A paramilitary invasion of just 480 men, using a handful of bomber planes supplied by the CIA, was able to overthrow Árbenz in June 1954, due in large part to CIA-controlled radio broadcasts that convinced the Guatemalan army and the civilian population that rebel forces had overtaken the capital.¹⁶ Carlos Castillo Armas, the leader of the coup, was installed as president and soon began reversing the reforms of the Arévalo and Árbenz administrations.¹⁷

In reaction to the rolling back of progressive policies and increasingly repressive actions by the government, leftist insurgencies in the countryside began in 1960, triggering the 36-year long Guatemalan Civil war between rebels and U.S. backed government forces. By the time peace was brokered in 1996, 200,000 civilians had been killed, many victims of a genocidal scorched-earth military campaign in the 1980s against the indigenous Mayans.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

Americans have notoriously short historical memories, but it is important that we acknowledge that the migration of children and families from Northern Triangle countries has its roots in decades of Cold War gamesmanship, as well as a relentless international war on drugs, that have left a legacy of violence and impunity in those countries.¹⁹

How shall we respond to the growing number of Central American refugees? As a problem to be solved, or as sisters and brothers to be welcomed, respected, and loved? Is it a supreme irony that so many children and families are seeking refuge in the very country that played such a large role in creating the poverty and violence they are fleeing—or is it perhaps something all together different—an opportunity for our redemption?



NO PLACE TO CALL HOME: The Affordable Housing Crisis in the Gulf South

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THE U.S. ROLE IN THE CURRENT CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRATION CRISIS

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