

# Emigrants' Stories of Foreign Aid and their Reasons for Emigration: Guatemalans on the Move<sup>\*</sup>

## Historias de migrantes y sus razones para la emigración: guatemaltecos en movimiento

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### ABSTRACT

This single instrumental case study was designed to learn about emigrants' reasons for emigrating, situated within the challenges and available opportunities in their home country of Guatemala. Eight emigrants (two women and six men) were interviewed to better understand their personal experiences and to examine the role of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) investments, Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), and Guatemala's domestic conditions and development in participants' decisions to emigrate to the U.S. The study was guided by the following central questions: (1) How do emigrants explain their reasons for leaving? (2) What motivates emigration in Guatemala's domestic conditions? (3) And how are these reasons related to U.S. policies, if at all? Data were drawn from multiple sources. The literature on Guatemala's history, and current USAID investments and impacts provides an understanding of the present context in Guatemala for emigration, and interviews with emigrants in the U.S. and Guatemala provide data on personal experiences with emigration. Primary findings were that significant economic hardship and lack of opportunity motivated emigrants' decisions to go to the U.S. All participants, except for one, had received no development aid, and for the one who had received aid, it did not factor into his decision to emigrate. Half of the participants indicated that they would not have emigrated if development programs had offered educational opportunities and jobs.

### Keywords

Guatemalan emigrants; motives for emigrating; USAID policies.

### RESUMEN

Este estudio instrumental de caso único está diseñado para conocer los motivos que tienen los migrantes para emigrar, en el marco de los desafíos y las oportunidades existentes en Guatemala, su país de procedencia. Se entrevistó a ocho emigrantes (dos mujeres y seis hombres) para comprender mejor sus experiencias personales y también para analizar el papel que tienen la Agencia de los Estados Unidos para el Desarrollo Internacional (USAID, por sus siglas en inglés), el Tratado de Libre Comercio entre Estados Unidos y Centroamérica (CAFTA, por sus siglas en inglés) y las condiciones internas de Guatemala en las decisiones que tomaron los participantes de emigrar a los EE.UU. El estudio estuvo

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guiado por las siguientes preguntas centrales: (1) ¿Cómo explican los emigrantes sus razones para salir de su país? (2) ¿De qué manera las condiciones internas de Guatemala motivan la emigración? (3) Y ¿de qué manera se relacionan estas razones con las políticas de los EE. UU., si están relacionadas? Los datos se obtuvieron de varias fuentes. Las publicaciones sobre la historia de Guatemala y las inversiones e impactos actuales del USAID ayudan a comprender el contexto que existe en Guatemala por el que ocurre la emigración, asimismo, las entrevistas con los emigrantes en los EE.UU. y Guatemala proporcionan datos sobre las experiencias personales en cuanto a la emigración. Los principales resultados obtenidos fueron que las grandes dificultades económicas y la falta de oportunidades fueron las razones por las que los emigrantes decidieron irse a los EE.UU. Ninguno de los participantes, salvo uno de ellos, recibió asistencia y esta no influyó en la decisión de emigrar de dicha persona. La mitad de los participantes indicó que no hubiese emigrado si los programas de desarrollo les hubieran ofrecido oportunidades educativas y laborales.

**Palabras clave**

emigrantes guatemaltecos; motivos para emigrar; políticas de USAID.

For those people living in countries with few employment and economic advancement opportunities, emigration remains a critical issue, as moving to the United States can offer a chance at a life not possible in their home country. In the U.S., immigration remains at the forefront of current events because of its impact on the economy, health care system, education, labor market, and national security. Note that this study uses the term *emigrant* to refer to people who leave their countries to live elsewhere and *immigrant* for people entering the U.S., or another country, from elsewhere. Guatemala, although a relatively small country, has been a notable contributor to U.S. immigration, especially undocumented workers and asylum seekers (Smith, 2006). In 2008, an estimated 1.3 million Guatemalan immigrants resided in the U.S. (Zong & Baralova, 2015) and the numbers have continued to increase. Many claim that Guatemalan emigration to the U.S. is largely due to domestic conditions including corruption, impunity, land rights, and gangs.

However, when considering Guatemala in an international context, a complex of issues emerges. Historically, Guatemala's domestic

challenges and weak development trajectory have interacted with U.S. policy to the detriment of Guatemalans who live with scarce resources. Although many foreign aid policies profess to support development in Guatemala (e.g., U.S. Agency for International Aid Development (USAID), Central American Foreign Trade Agreement (CAFTA), and anti-drug policies), they may interfere with domestic development, and actually encourage emigration. Although the U.S. has provided Guatemala with approximately \$736 000 000 in development aid since 2008, debates question whether potential emigrants are actually benefiting from that assistance.

Reasons for emigration have changed over the years. Smith (2006) explored historical migration trends and reasons for Guatemalan emigration over a 15-year period from 1990 to 2005. He found that reasons for emigration shifted from asylum seeking in the 1990s to a quest for economic prosperity after the end of the civil conflict in 1996. Smolarek's (2007) interviews addressed the roles of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and CAFTA in decisions to emigrate, but USAID's efforts are not explored. Finally, many indigenous Mayans may be leaving Guatemala due to an agrarian crisis as well as the high unemployment rate in both rural and urban contexts (Davis, 2007).

The current study features the personal stories of eight adult emigrants: three who are currently living in the U.S. and five who have returned to Guatemala. The single case study (Creswell & Poth, 2017) was selected as the methodology because the purpose was to examine the current real-world issue of emigration, while situating emigrants' reasons for leaving Guatemala in the context of the challenges and opportunities in their home country. The case study falls within Creswell's definition in that it is bounded by certain parameters, which are contemporary Guatemalans' views of their personal experiences with emigration. The study draws on multiple sources of data: personal interviews were a primary source of data but other documents provided information on present-day conditions in Guatemala and U.S. aid. The study was guided by the following central questions: (1) How

do emigrants explain their reasons for leaving Guatemala? (2) What motivates emigration in Guatemala's domestic conditions? and (3) How are these reasons related to U.S. policies, if at all?

### *Domestic Conditions in Guatemala that Encourage Emigration*

A variety of domestic factors have contributed to the larger number of emigrants leaving Guatemala over the last decade, including limited opportunities for economic advancement, government corruption, and the 36-year civil conflict. Guatemala's immigration into the United States began to increase during the 1960s, at the time of the country's civil war. During the 1980s, the number of Guatemalans entering the U.S. reached approximately 60 000 with approximately 145 000 Guatemalans being granted permanent residency during the years of 2000-2008 (Zong & Baralova, 2015). In 2008, an estimated 1.3 million Guatemalan immigrants resided in the United States (Zong & Baralova, 2015). In 2015 alone, an estimated 928 000 immigrants arrived in the U.S. (Zong & Baralova, 2015).

The Guatemalan media reports violence in the country from active gangs, extortion, and assaults, in addition to destruction from natural disasters. Taken together, these factors likely promote emigration. Economic challenges such as the low standard of living in Guatemala driven by limited job opportunities, poor health care, and unfair land distribution also likely contribute to continued emigration, especially among people from rural areas and those of indigenous descent (Davis, 2007; Smolarek, 2007). A report by Arriola et al. (2016) explained that the primary sectors that need development are education, healthcare, and employment opportunities because they contribute to the high numbers of emigrants.

### **Lack of economic opportunity**

Inequality in Guatemala is most extreme in rural communities and for women, with men having

more opportunities for educational and economic advancement (Smith, 2006). Currently, 52 percent of all people living in poverty are indigenous (World Bank Group, 2017).

At least fifty percent of employed Guatemalans find work in the agricultural industries of coffee, sugar, and cotton plantations (Arriola et al., 2016). These workers are primarily indigenous with no to little education. Thus, agricultural jobs, which barely pay subsistence wages, are the only way for many people to earn a living. Although agricultural exports have increased due to the CAFTA legislation, the economic benefits are not bettering life for the poor. Instead, the wealthy Ladinos (those of mixed indigenous and European descent) become wealthier. In other words, the poor in Guatemala do not appear to be benefiting from the "existing patterns of economic growth" (World Bank, 2003, p. 75). When Guatemalans were surveyed about why their children will not have better lives in the future, 61.6% blamed the country's economic situation (Arriola et al., 2016).

### *Inadequate education*

In addition to economic challenges, Guatemala continues to face obstacles with respect to poor education and health care systems. Although there has been some progress since 1996 when the war ended, additional efforts are necessary to improve the quality and affordability of services. Low levels of educational attainment interact with lack of economic opportunity and racism toward indigenous people to encourage emigration (Smith, 2006). Both the illiteracy rate and school enrollment statistics reveal the consequences of income inequality. For example, only 58% of children living in extreme poverty attend primary school compared to 90% of their wealthier counterparts (Arriola et al., 2016). Additionally, approximately half of the population (47.9%) only has an elementary education (Arriola et al., 2016).

### *Inequality, racism, and land rights*

Racism towards the indigenous dates back to colonial times when their land was seized by Europeans. Foreign control of Guatemala's economy began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as its tropical climate and products were desired by the global market (Krzaric, 2004). The indigenous people then became a source of free labor for the United Fruit Company (Schlesinger & Kinzer, 2005).

Today, land rights still favor the rich (who are most often ladino, not indigenous). For example, 2% of the population owns 60 percent of the agricultural land (Cooperative for Education, 2015). The World Bank states that "individuals in rural areas in the lowest income ranges are owners of the smallest parcels, but within each income range, the indigenous have the greatest probability of having the least land" (Krzaric, 2004, p. 5). The situation of the indigenous agrarian workers is exacerbated when the value of the crop farmed on that land is determined by national and international market price (Aguilar-Støen, Taylor, & Castellanos, 2016; Barquin, 2014; Moran-Taylor & Taylor, 2010). Deforestation also promotes emigration north because people lose their livelihoods (Shriar, 2014).

### **Lack of national responsibility and responsiveness**

Guatemala's limited investment in its own development despite many communities' demands for more justice and better living conditions remains problematic (Schlesinger & Kinzer, 2005). The fight for progress in Guatemala has been restricted by historical discrimination and powerful corporate interests, which have prevented the government from developing the necessary strategies to address these significant obstacles (Arriola et al., 2016). The government of Guatemala has the lowest tax revenue in Latin America, resulting in limited public services and investments in rural areas (Krzaric, 2004). Guatemalans, especially those living in extreme poverty, do not receive

government assistance. Only 0.5% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is spent on social assistance programs (e.g., education and health services) (Cabrera et al., 2015).

### **Foreign Aid and its Effectiveness**

The current study uses the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) as an example of international aid in Guatemala for two reasons: 1) the U.S. has a long history of political and economic influence in Guatemala, and 2) Guatemala is one of the largest Central American recipients of U.S. foreign aid. In 2012 alone, Guatemala received \$145 million from aid from the U.S. government and an estimated total of \$683.83 million since 2006 (U.S. Government, 2016).

USAID's stated mission is to partner with countries to end poverty and promote democracy, security, and economic development (U.S. Government, 2016). USAID in Guatemala funds diverse initiatives that address human rights, democratic governance, economic development, educational and social services, environment, health, humanitarian services, and peace and security (U.S. Government, 2016).

Researchers continue to struggle to find a concrete and generalizable answer to the question of whether aid overall has a positive or negative impact on Guatemala, which is complicated by the fact that aid is distributed in various ways and results vary by region. Goldsmith (2001) argues that foreign aid is positively associated with more political freedom, civil liberties, and economic freedom. Other empirical studies offer different perspectives that USAID and other U.S. foreign aid may not benefit the individuals who need it the most, such as those who live in the rural areas of Guatemala, are not landowners, and are pre-literate (Reeves, 2006). Ellerman (2006) criticizes the structure of aid and the ability of bilateral and multilateral aid agencies like the World Bank to socially engineer a better world. Klees (2010) and Samoff (2009) take a more extreme stance that the purpose of foreign aid is to promote global inequality and

is actually accomplishing that. Smith and Little (2009) argue that U.S. policies in Guatemala do not address the inequalities that indigenous Mayans face because those policies are not aimed at revising institutionalized discriminatory conditions.

Recommendations for improving the effectiveness of foreign aid include Klees' (2010) support for strengthening linkages between aid and development. Other researchers argue that the impact of the aid needs to be assessed by the donor nations (Dichter, 2003; Easterly, 2006; Ellerman, 2006; Moyo, 2009; Riddell, 2007). Amin (1990) calls for the separation of foreign aid from world trade and for a decrease in aid systems to focus on the domestic need to establish functional democracies in countries like Guatemala. Easterly (2006) suggests that aid be oriented towards programs that seek a direct and concrete impact on the poor, diverting assistance away from broad structural adjustment policies (SAPs) and poverty reduction strategy plans (PRSPs)

## CAFTA

Another relevant policy associated with Guatemalan emigration rates to the U.S. is the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). The U.S. supported CAFTA as an avenue for economic growth in Central America, but it was controversial from the start. It passed in Congress at midnight by a single vote (Beachy, 2014). Tom Davis, a Republican pro-CAFTA congressman, stated that CAFTA was “more than just a trade pact... it's the best immigration, anti-gang, and anti-drug policy” (Beachy, 2014, p. 7).

However, scholars argue that CAFTA has brought no noticeable stimulation of economic growth (Beachy, 2014). They posit that it has increased levels of gang and drug-related violence, and increased emigration to the United States since it was passed in 2005 (Beachy, 2014). Congresswoman Kaptur and Beachy (2014), a Global Trade Watch research director, called CAFTA a failure because it exacerbated

the “economic instability feeding the region's increase in violence and forced migration” (p. 4). Under CAFTA, Guatemalan family farmers have lost their markets to large agro-business and have relied on short-term jobs in factories assembling clothing (Beachy, 2014). Congresswoman Kaptur predicted that “the CAFTA deal could lead to the displacement of the family farmers” (Beachy, 2014, p. 7). This disappearance of local agricultural jobs from Guatemala created an economic slowdown. Although CAFTA has benefited the powerful corporate interests in Guatemala and abroad, it has threatened not only Guatemala's infrastructure for a healthy, consistent, and culturally relevant diet for the rural poor but also their employment opportunities (Isakson, 2014).

## Current Study

The Guatemalan government is responsible for responding to issues such as racism, low government spending on social development programs, exclusion of poor and indigenous from land ownership, and the facilitation of national economic growth to benefit the poor. If those factors can be addressed and initiatives successfully implemented, emigration rates to the U.S. will likely decline. However, the literature and emigration figures show that the government has not responded effectively to this call. Additionally, research findings on the benefits and effectiveness of initiatives like USAID and CAFTA are mixed at best. Critics argue that USAID is primarily intended to safeguard U.S. interests rather than improve conditions in Guatemala.

More research is needed on the interaction between USAID support for development and Guatemala's domestic conditions, like the elite's stronghold on power and wealth, and the lack of national programs for sustaining development, improving the country's infrastructure, bettering living conditions for the majority poor population. Scholars have addressed the high level of inequality in Guatemala but not the lack of infrastructure or USAID's impact on

the country's development (Aguilar Støen et al., 2016; Barquin, 2014; Hendrix, 2002; Moran-Taylor & Taylor, 2010). Furthermore, the link between those factors and emigration is not well-established. We also have limited knowledge of personal accounts of emigrants' reasons for leaving Guatemala and immigrating to the U.S. Data connecting domestic conditions in Guatemala and emigrants' personal accounts are needed to understand the possible ways in which national policies and international aid interact to motivate or discourage emigration.

The current study attempts to address a major gap in the literature by describing personal accounts of emigrants' choice to uproot and leave their families and home country. It includes voices of actual Guatemalan emigrants as a first step in understanding the influence of foreign aid (through USAID) and the domestic conditions that motivated their decisions to emigrate.

## Method

Two key assumptions motivated the study at the outset. One was that hundreds of thousands of dollars from the United States flow to Guatemala for aid, and this investment should help reduce emigration by offering economic and educational opportunities that otherwise would not be available. Another was that Guatemalans would prefer to stay with their families and in their native country if they have a standard of living that provides for their needs such as food, education, and providing for children.

The study uses social constructivism (Creswell & Poth, 2017) as its interpretive framework because the primary purpose of the study is to better understand Guatemalan emigration rather than generate solutions. With that said, the process of the study generated some ideas for possible improvements, which are included in the conclusion. The methodology is a single instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) that incorporates multiple sources of data, including a review of U.S. policy affecting Guatemala, the amount and nature of development aid, Guatemala's internal domestic conditions, and

the qualitative interview data from emigrants. A total of eight one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted in the U.S. and Guatemala. The purpose of the interviews was to elicit emigrants' reasons for leaving their home country. The Institutional Review Board at Dominican University approved the study.

## *Reflexivity*

Creswell and Poth (2017) emphasize the importance of qualitative researchers sharing relevant aspects of their backgrounds so that their audience knows how they might inform interpretations of the data. Significant experiences in my life motivated this study. I am a Guatemalan native and U.S. citizen who lives in California. I have personally witnessed the country's inequality and poverty. When I learned about the large Guatemalan emigrant community in Marin County, CA, where I was pursuing my undergraduate degree, I began to wonder about the trials and dreams that had brought them to their new home. I wondered if the Guatemalan government was doing everything it could to support its people, and with U.S. aid flowing into the country, why emigrants would want to leave their homeland. These questions and awareness coupled with a long-standing interest in immigration, which started with my own immigration experience and continued with a visit to the U.S. Mexican border, led to the current study. This study offered me the opportunity to integrate my personal experiences with my undergraduate studies.

## *Participants*

Snowball sampling was used to recruit interviewees. More specifically, after the interviews, participants suggested other potential interviewees and sought their consent to be contacted by the researcher. The sample included two women and six men, average age 48.5 years ranging from 23 to 78 years. Three live in the California Bay Area (Marin County) and five in Guatemala (San Pedro las Huertas,

Sacatepequez). They spent between 2 to 38 years in the U.S., averaging 15.2 years. Table 1 below summarizes six overarching characteristics of the participants and their primary reasons for emigrating. The researcher assigned participants pseudonyms.

**TABLE 1**  
*Demographics of Participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnic Identity	Age	Reason For Emigration	Education	Time Spent in U.S.	Location of Interview
Maria	F	I	50	Economic	No formal education	8 years	U.S.
Diego	M	M	78	Economic	6 <sup>th</sup> grade	38 years	Guatemala
Santiago	M	I	46	Economic/ New Experience	High school	10 years	Guatemala
Mateo	M	I	50	Economic	High school	14 ½ years	Guatemala
Sofia	F	I	23	Economic/ Danger	High school	8 years	U.S.
Lucas	M	I	48	Economic	No formal education	26 years	U.S.
David	M	C	48	Economic	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	2 years	Guatemala
Matus	M	I	45	Economic	No formal education	15 years	Guatemala

Note: F = Female, M = Male; I = Indigenous; L = Ladino; C = Campesino  
Source: own work.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

An interview protocol guided the interviews. All questions were asked in English; participants responded in their preferred language. The interviews were comprised of 12 questions (see Appendix) including demographic information, living conditions in Guatemala, motivations for leaving, reasons for returning, what would have made a difference in their decision to emigrate, their level of awareness of NGOs or government run programs (in U.S. and/or Guatemalan) that would have assisted them, and how informed they were about Guatemala's domestic affairs (economics, violence, and security).

The eight interviews were conducted in participants' homes over the course of one month. Four interviewees responded in Spanish and four in English. Probes encouraged more in-depth responses from the interviewees; the duration of each interview was approximately 30 minutes. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. Participants were given the right to either accept or decline the researcher's request to audio record the interview. One declined.

Transcripts of interviews were used to create short profiles of each participant and then Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for thematic

analysis of qualitative data were used to analyze the full transcripts. For the analysis, the transcripts were coded, interpreted, and organized into themes within three larger categories derived from the research questions. This analysis blended theoretical and inductive thematic analyses. Theoretical thematic analysis, which was the primary approach used in this study, codes for specific research questions. However, inductive thematic analysis, which allows themes to emerge from the data and may not link directly to research questions, added two categories to the analysis. The discussion treats the interpretation of the significance of the themes by relating them to previous literature.

The data were coded by one person and checked for accuracy by a second. The process included detailed reading of the transcripts of the audio interviews and identification of patterned responses, and cross-cutting themes within three overarching categories linked to interview questions: reasons for emigrating, knowledge of or experience with aid, and the difficulties and benefits experienced with emigration. Two additional categories emerged from the data related to benefits and difficulties of emigration. Sub-themes were identified within themes to capture and highlight the richness of participants' responses. Unusual or interesting responses were coded separately when they did not fit into a theme, ensuring that all data were represented in the analysis and discussion (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Findings**

The findings below focus on the major themes of the analysis.

#### *Participants*

The sample, although small, reflects a cross-section of adult Guatemalan emigrants in terms of age, years spent away from Guatemala, current place of residence (either in the U.S. or in Guatemala), and gender.

### *Results of Thematic Analysis*

The results of the theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) follow. The headings represent the three categories and most general level of analysis. The sub-headings represent themes within a category, and sub-themes are illustrated within the larger themes using examples and quotes.

#### *Reasons for Emigrating*

All interviewees gave at least two reasons for their decisions to emigrate.

#### *Desire to improve*

All interviewees named reasons related to seeking more opportunities as their primary or secondary reasons for emigrating to the U.S. Within the desire to improve, the absence of economic and educational opportunity in Guatemala emerged as a subtheme for five participants. Lucas, living in the U.S. said, “Porque yo no tuve estudios allá entonces pues eso mi hizo viajar para los Estados Unidos” (Because I didn’t study there (in Guatemala) that made me travel to the United States (Lucas, 2016). Matias, who has returned to Guatemala, said, “La falta de oportunidades en Guatemala, no había trabajo, no tengo educación y tenía una familia que necesitaba ayudar y mantener” (2017) (The absence of opportunities in Guatemala. There was no work, I don’t have an education and I had a family that needed help and support). Diego said,

“The main reason why I left was due to the lack of job opportunities here in Guatemala. Before I left I had a job that was not stable and very informal but it got me money to pay for food and my children’s education.” Poor economic conditions, unemployment, unstable employment, low pay, and no education contributed to interviewees’ perceptions of insufficient opportunities; these circumstances forced participants to consider emigration. (2017)

Living in conditions of poverty, which is related to the absence of opportunities, emerged as a motivator of emigration. Maria, living in the U.S., explained how her family was living on wages below subsistence level prior to emigrating,

“Yo con cinco niños... no había mucho trabajo y si había, se ganaba pocito... Y yo comencé a trabajar también en una guardería de niños donde me pagaban 50 centavos medio día y un quetzal por un día total.” (I with five children... There wasn’t much work and if there was, it paid little... And I started work too in childcare where they paid me 50 centavos for half day and one quetzal for a full day). (2016)

Mateo, living in Guatemala said,

“I was making around 450 to 550 quetzales a week. The money that I was getting was just not enough and it was not really stable... There were a lot of bills that I couldn’t pay at that time so I had to go talk to them, explain that I would pay next week. But it was hard.” (2017)

A third sub-theme was “*el Sueño Americano*” [the American Dream] or the promise of a more comfortable, prosperous life in the U.S.; Mateo, Lucas, and David named this as an influence in their decision to emigrate. David, living in Guatemala said,

“Mi familia era muy pobre y eso fue porque yo me fui para yo poder al menos salir de la pobreza y había escuchado del ‘Sueño Americano’ donde había trabajo y a uno le pagaban muy bien.” (My family was very poor and that is why I left to at least get out of poverty and had heard of the American Dream where there was work and it paid very well). (2016)

#### *Responsibility to and for family*

Related to the desire for greater prosperity, interviewees said their families influenced their decisions to emigrate. Large family size and a need to provide for family members were reasons for six of the interviewees. Santiago, living in Guatemala said, “I think the first thing was my family. The first thing was to make money, that’s



first." Mateo, also in Guatemala said, "Family was a big factor to leave." (2017)

### *Danger and violence*

The two women in the study were the only interviewees who said that safety and security issues were primary motivators in their decisions to emigrate. Maria, living in the U.S. said,

"El motivo fue por el peligro, peligro va con mucha violencia. Y sí me asaltaron a mí a punto de arma y también a mis hijos. Uno de mis hijos dos veces y otro de mis hijos que estudiaba como cinco veces." (The motive was danger, danger goes with a lot of violence. And yes, they assaulted me at gunpoint and also my children. One of my children two times and another of my children, who was studying, five times). (2016)

Sofia also said that she had been a victim of attempted rape, and that she felt endangered being in Guatemala. She also mentioned the high murder rate in the country, and extortion and murders of bus drivers.

### *Personal adventure*

Although not commonly mentioned, Santiago and Lucas said that a motive for emigrating was adventure seeking, and for Lucas it was his primary reason. He said,

"Necesitaba descubrirme... Eso me influyó... Yo dije que me voy, me voy. A mí me gusta como explorar un nuevo que nunca lo he conocido, me gusta conocer, me gusta saber qué es lo que pasa, como se siente." (I needed to discover myself... That influenced me... I said that I'm going, I'm going. I like to explore new things that I have not known. I like to know, I like to know what happens and how it feels). (2016)

Santiago said, "I was single and wanted adventure, to be free, but also to help the family out." (2017) Both of these males were in their twenties and were not yet parents when they emigrated; perhaps their youthful spirits are represented in this motive.

*Learn language, customs, and traditions of the U.S.*

Santiago, living in Guatemala, was a Spanish teacher to foreigners before he emigrated to the U.S., said that a motive for him was "to learn another language, and other things, customs because I worked with Americans. I was a Spanish teacher." This interviewee had exceptional employment as a Spanish teacher and more exposure to different cultures and languages than other interviewees. One of the benefits of emigrating to the U.S. was that he learned English. Because only two of the eight participants had earned a high school education, it is likely that most of the sample had not been exposed to U.S. culture before emigrating.

## **Participants' Knowledge of and Experience with Aid Programs**

### *No influence*

Five of the eight participants stated that when they emigrated they were not aware of any domestic government aid programs, of USAID, or of non-governmental assistance programs related to education or employment opportunities.

### *Some, but limited influence*

Mateo and Santiago said that they each knew of one program that provided free education but neither was U.S. funded. Mateo said, "In Guatemala there was one....a [private] United States organization, and they helped out my kids for five years before I went to the United States. I stopped because there were more people who needed more help than us." (2017) Santiago recalled, "I knew of a lot of programs for children... They gave classes... and my sister worked there... There have been government programs... but you need to find where they are. Nothing to help adults like me that don't have jobs." (2017) The lesson learned is that the programs participants mentioned were focused

on education. Although helpful, those programs did not directly address the most central need for participants – steady employment.

### *Potential “deal breaker”*

If there had been such programs, four participants reported that they would not have made the journey to the U.S. and would have stayed in Guatemala with their families. Two of the participants said that the presence of aid programs would not have made an impact on their decision because they wanted to experience the American Dream for themselves.

### *Criticism of aid*

Mateo criticized the work of the NGO that benefited his children, saying that the money was not spent for what it was intended. He said, “Those kinds of organizations... they at first start doing good things and then [with] corruption start not using the money in the right way.” Lucas knew that foreign assistance is being sent to Guatemala but he said that his village remains unchanged. He said that his family still does not know of any assistance programs in their rural village, “Mi familia esta allá pero no han escuchado de programas que dan de asistencia ni en mi pueblo. Pero solo yo escuchó que llega el dinero pero mi pueblo sigue lo mismo...” (My family is there but hasn’t heard of programs that give assistance in my village. But I heard that the money arrives but the village stays the same). (Lucas, 2016)

## **Assessment of Emigration: Benefits and Disadvantages**

### *Benefits*

Participants’ current employment suggests that their economic stability has improved since their emigration, and that their decision to emigrate contributed positively to their personal and financial well-being. They experienced peace of

mind, provided an education for their children, and in some cases, started their own businesses and bought their own homes.

A compelling unexpected finding was that the impact of immigration on the lives of the emigrants was overall positive. All of the participants were more successful financially once they arrived in the United States; many sent remittances to family in Guatemala. The three who live in the United States mentioned that they are more financially stable now than they were before emigrating. Furthermore, they would not consider going back to Guatemala because they have their families living in the U.S. and their children are receiving an education. One enthusiastically supported his pursuit of the American Dream, “Yo quiero luchar para el sueño Americano” [I want to fight for the American Dream.]. (Lucas, 2016)

The participants who had returned to Guatemala are in better living and working conditions than pre-emigration. The emigrants said that they learned new skills, saved money to build houses or start businesses; a few even received some education themselves. Santiago said,

“It’s transformed me...the United States helped me understand who [I] was... And [U.S. friends] helped me go to school and I changed my perspective because I learn about women being equal and their rights in the United States.” (2017)

Similarly, Barrett, Gibbons, Peláz & Ponce (2014) found that many returnees in Guatemala had an enhanced sense of gender equality. Mateo, who lives in Guatemala, said that he had started his own businesses and bought land as a result of his emigration experience: “Now I am my own boss. I own the festive rental business by sending money to get it started and bought land and build a house.” Thus, it is possible that these positive experiences in the U.S. will continue to persuade potential emigrants that emigration is worth the risk for a chance at the “American Dream.”

## Difficulties

Along with the benefits of their decisions to emigrate, interviewees talked about the challenges and disadvantages of those choices. Three primary difficulties were mentioned related to emigration: being separated from family members who are in the other country, missing one's home country, and having to work hard to earn enough money to send back to Guatemala for their families. Mateo said that he returned to Guatemala because of children and aging parents. Maria, residing in the U.S., said she always missed Guatemala, "Pues bueno siempre extraño a mi país, extraño a mi país porque es el que me vio nacer" [I always miss my country because it was where I was born.]. (2016) Matias, in Guatemala, said that he had to work very hard when in the U.S.,

"Todo no es fácil cuando llegas a los Estados Unidos... Pero tuve que trabajar muy duro para poder mandar un poco de dinero para la educación de mis hijos porque para mí sus educaciones era importante" [Everything is not easy when you arrive in the United States... But I had to work very hard to be able to send a little money for my children's education because for me their education was important.]. (Matias, 2017)

In sum, no one said that they regretted their decisions to emigrate with the caveat that four participants would not have emigrated if they could have benefitted from aid initiatives.

When asked if they plan to return or try again to emigrate to the United States, four out of the five in Guatemala said no because of the difficult journey. However, one participant was considering a return because his daughter was born there, and he wants her to attend a U.S. university.

## Discussion

The current study investigated why Guatemalans chose to emigrate to the United States, with a focus on the role of domestic conditions and U.S. aid with respect to emigration.

Contrary to the U.S. media, most people did not emigrate because of violence even though they said that violence was a concern. Their reasons centered on insufficient opportunities for economic advancement; barriers to that advancement included: unemployment, unstable jobs, and low pay. This study affirms and expands on previous research (Davis, 2007; Smith, 2006; Smolarek, 2007) that revealed that emigrants' reasons for leaving Guatemala were related to seeking economic prosperity. As did Smolarek (2007), this study also found that providing for children's education was a motivation for emigration but this study adds that emigrants' motives included responsibility for providing for their parents. Adventure and learning a new language and culture were motives unique to young men in their twenties.

Safety issues are currently a concern for most interviewees, but the two women who had experienced violence personally were the only ones who named it as a motive for emigrating. Given the prevailing machistic culture in Guatemala, this makes sense because women are threatened at home as well as on the street (Gibbons & Luna, 2015). Gibbons and Luna found that gender role stereotypes in Central America align with women worrying about violence whereas men have economic concerns. For example, *caballerismo* dictates that men provide for the family while machistic culture objectifies women and puts them at risk of violence from men. The U.S. press highlights violence as a primary motivation for emigration, but given the findings from the current study, economic reasons were much more prevalent. However, the small number of women participants in the study compared to men might have influenced this finding. If more women had participated in the study, the desire to escape violence might have had greater prevalence.

The findings around benefits that participants experienced from their decisions to emigrate such as achieving greater economic stability and gaining the ability to provide more educational opportunities for their children are not unique to this study. Barrett et al. (2014) who found that the majority of the participants in their study

were able to move their families out of poverty “through labor and monetary remittances” (p. 10), and nearly half of returned migrants invested some of their monetary remittances in their children’s education. The two studies also found that participants mentioned facing similar difficulties in their emigration experiences such as being separated from family members and the hard work they encountered.

Participants’ experiences in this study suggest that U.S. and other aid and investments aimed at development in Guatemala do not influence decisions to emigrate. An initial premise of the study was that these investments reduce emigration by offering economic and educational opportunities that otherwise would not be available. These opportunities were not available for the participants in the present study, but if they had been, interviewees indicated that they would help slow emigration if they reach more people in need. Much of USAID’s support for development in Guatemala was not known to participants.

A second premise was that Guatemalans would prefer to stay with their families and remain in their native country if they have a standard of living that provides for their needs such as food, education, and providing for children. This premise was upheld in light of participants’ personal narratives.

## **Recommendations for Aid and Decreasing Emigration**

Recommendations for addressing conditions to decrease emigration include development of programs that target adult populations at risk for emigrating and to address the economic needs of the community in both rural and urban areas. The Guatemalan government should prioritize managing and sustaining foreign subsidized programs, while eventually establishing its own programs for domestic development. The majority of emigrants in the study did not believe that the government was helping them, and the literature supports their views (Arriola et al., 2016; Davis, 2007; Smolarek, 2007; Zong

& Baralova, 2015). Of course, the issue of government corruption in Guatemala must end before it can fund and develop the infrastructure it needs. Legislation must be passed and enforced that protects the indigenous Maya and those living with scarce economic resources and unstable employment to discourage them from emigrating to the United States.

## **Limitations and Future Directions for Research**

It was beyond the scope of this study to do broader sampling to achieve greater representation from different geographic areas. In addition, there was greater representation of Guatemalan residents than U.S. residents in the sample and more men than women interviewees. Another limitation was that the sample only included emigrants and not those who had considered emigration but had decided against it. So although the sample reflects a cross-section of adult Guatemalan emigrants, it is small.

Further research should address emigrants’ motives for leaving in areas targeted by U.S. and other aid programs, studying emigrants as well as those who stay. Inquiry into Guatemala’s domestic development efforts and their influence on emigration is another area of focus for future studies. A third area for future exploration is internal emigration from rural areas to the capital or other urban centers, and combination emigration, meaning internal immigration followed by external.

## **Conclusion**

Emigrants in this study were seeking opportunities for better lives for themselves and their children, primarily economic improvement and stability, but also opportunity for safety in the case of women, and educational opportunities for children. The benefits of their emigration experiences stood out as life changing and positive. Most impressive was that each participant had improved life circumstances whether it was their economic

circumstances, education, ability to provide for family, or changes in their values toward greater gender equality. Aid programs, both domestic government-funded programs and international support, did not influence emigrants' decisions to leave their homeland to seek better lives, but the study suggests that they could discourage emigration if they reached people in need and if they targeted and served adults who need greater job opportunities. Most profoundly, this study highlights the need for the Guatemalan government to take responsibility for its own development, providing opportunities that enable all citizens to work towards better lives.

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## Appendix

### Interview Protocol

1. What is your name? How old are you?
2. Where do you currently live? Guatemala? U.S.?
3. For interviewee in the U.S.
  - a. How long have you been here?For interviewee in Guatemala

- b. How long has it been since you tried to go to the U.S. or returned to the U.S.?  
 c. Have you considered emigrating to the U.S.? If no, why not?
4. What conditions motivated you to leave Guatemala?  
 Do you have a job in Guatemala? If so, what is it? Did you lose it or did it not pay enough?  
 What were some other financial issues? What influences did family have? Was danger a factor? Explain.
5. Can you describe to me your living situation/conditions before you left?  
 And now?  
 Whose house -Abuelita? Suegra? Papas? Propia?  
 How many people were living there? Who were they?  
 Were you happy? Stressed? Anxious? Why?  
 Was it safe or did/do you feel uncomfortable or endangered?
6. Do you plan to return? Why and what influences or conditions would motivate you to do that?
7. How do you feel now about your decision to leave Guatemala? Would you do it again? Under what conditions?
8. On the list below indicate your top 3 choices for what would have made a difference in your decision to emigrate:
- More economic opportunities such as local cooperation manufacturing, job training programs for youth with matched job opportunities, and new innovative manufacturing corporations.
  - Education programs that support study from basic elementary through university.
  - Programs that offer alternatives to gang membership.
  - Programs that offer health care and family planning.
9. To what extent do you stay informed on the current political conditions in Guatemala?
- Not at all
  - A little
  - Somewhat
  - Quite a bit
  - Quite a lot
10. To what extent do you stay informed on the current economic conditions in Guatemala?
- Not at all
  - A little
  - Somewhat
  - Quite a bit
  - A lot
11. To what extent do you stay informed on the current security conditions in Guatemala?
- Not at all
  - A little
  - Somewhat
  - Quite a bit
  - A lot
12. At the time you decided to emigrate did you know of any government programs or NGO's (non-governmental organization) that offered assistance in education or economic opportunity? If so, what were they?

## Notes

- \* Research Article.