# [The Root Causes Of Migration In Central American Countries](https://www.npr.org/2019/03/06/700873481/the-root-causes-of-migration-in-central-american-countries)

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AUDIE CORNISH, HOST:

Let's take a look at what the U.S. is doing about the reasons why so many Central Americans are coming to the U.S. and asking for asylum, about the poverty and violence in their home countries. Joining us is Shannon O'Neil. She's an expert on Latin America with the Council on Foreign Relations. Welcome to the program.

SHANNON O'NEIL: Thanks for having me.

CORNISH: So we've heard a lot now about what the Trump administration does once migrants make it to the border. Can you talk about what the administration has been doing to try and address some of those, as we said, push factors of poverty or violence in countries in Central America - El Salvador, Guatemala?

O'NEIL: So since 2015, which was the last surge of people coming up from Central America, Congress has sent in a bipartisan agreement somewhere in the range of $750 million a year to Central America to try to deal with these root causes. So this goes into all sorts of programs, things to address youth at risk, after-school programs and the like. It goes to programs to create jobs in the region. It goes to programs to strengthen police or the court system to try to bring safety to the streets there to change the factors that are driving all of these individuals and these families north to the U.S. border.

CORNISH: But did it make a dent? I mean, here we are again asking the same question.

O'NEIL: Here we are again. And in part, these are huge problems to grapple with. And $750 million is not going to change things overnight in countries that are plagued with some of the world's highest violence rates and homicide rates, where you see abject poverty, where you're seeing real consequences of climate change taking away basic crops - coffee and the like - through a years-long drought now. So there's a lot of issues here that will take time to change but also take more money than the U.S. has been providing.

CORNISH: The other issue is given the level of corruption or government mismanagement, are there effective partners on the ground? I mean, is there a way for the U.S. or any other country in the region to effectively spend money to help people in these countries who might otherwise become migrants?

O'NEIL: This is a challenge as well. We have seen on the ground in some of these countries small organizations, NGOs and civil society organizations that have made the difference in the lives of individuals, of families, of particular blocks or particular neighborhoods. But looking for systematic change on a national level - that has to involve the governments in these countries in Guatemala, in El Salvador, in Honduras. And many of these governments, as you say, have been plagued by corruption and worse in several - in the last several years.

CORNISH: Now, Mexico has put forth a possible solution dubbed a kind of Marshall Plan for Central America. And it would require major U.S. investment in the region, right? And the idea is to create jobs in Central America and Mexico so that people won't want to leave home. Is there - is that a solution that has some buy-in?

O'NEIL: So Mexico has talked about sending billions of dollars to Central America, to upping what the United States has been doing for the last few years. But, one, Mexico would need the United States to join in in that. And, two, Mexico and the new president there, Lopez Obrador - he has made lots of promises to Mexicans themselves to increase jobs in Mexico, to improve the economy there, to provide benefits to old people, to young people, to students, to all sorts of people that will cost a lot of money. And so when he is forced to choose between his own citizens and Central Americans and particularly Central Americans in Central America, I think it will come down to funding Mexicans.

CORNISH: Is the administration - U.S. administration interested in this at all?

O'NEIL: The Trump administration the last couple of years - when they've sent a budget to Congress, they have reduced the spending for Central America for reduce - for these root causes, as such, in these countries. Now, Congress has put the money back in, but this has not been the focus of the Trump administration. Where they have put their focus is on the border and the enforcement on the border. So while we spend less than a billion dollars in Central America to change the things on the ground there, we spend over $20 billion enforcing the border and dealing with the Central Americans when they show up there.

CORNISH: In the meantime, are there any other initiatives that have come up? I mean, is this something that people are looking at more closely?

O'NEIL: Overall I think this is something that will continue to be a huge challenge for the United States and increasingly for Mexico because the Trump administration's policy - this remain in Mexico, to have these citizens of Central America wait in Mexico for perhaps years for the United States to process their asylum cases - we'll just see more problems not just in Central America but all the way along the path.

CORNISH: That Shannon O'Neil, expert on Latin America with the Council on Foreign Relations. Thank you for speaking with us.

O'NEIL: Thank you.