

Policy Report

AN ANALYSIS OF THE BIDEN-HARRIS ADMINISTRATION PLAN FOR CENTRAL AMERICA

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Migrant Roots Media (MRM) is a digital platform that amplifies the voices of migrants, children of migrants, and those struggling to stay and thrive in their homelands to unearth the root causes of global migration.

We strategically position intersectional voices so they can aid in advancing narratives and socio-political analyses concerning migration and other social issues.

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After a contentious race where volunteer poll workers and vote defenders across the United States showed up en masse to protect communities' right to vote, citizens in the United States have elected Joe Biden and Kamala Harris as their president and vice-president. For many, their victory represents a sign of hope in repairing the damage the past four years have inflicted upon vulnerable communities nationally and abroad. However, for communities experiencing criminalization, incarceration, deportation, and displacement, the sigh of relief is limited.

Only a few days ago on January 6th, we witnessed the rage of white supremacists and other Trump supporters as they desperately attempted to take over the US Capitol during the Save America March as a last effort to keep President Trump in office. This action was encouraged not only by President Trump himself, but by members of Congress and other government officials.

In addition, many prominent figures released statements condemning the event, including former Republican President George W. Bush, who added a particularly offensive remark which unsurprisingly [lacked an understanding of the impact of US imperialism](#) in Latin America. He stated, "This is how election results are disputed in a banana republic – not our democratic republic." In reference to this and other similar remarks, Guatemalan journalist Maria Inés Taracena writes that they are "an approach that blatantly disregards the fact that the political and economic issues in most of those countries are a direct result of U.S. intervention and colonialism." This blatant disregard is not only espoused through political rhetoric but, as our analysis of [The Biden Plan to Build Security and Prosperity in Partnership with the People of Central America](#) argues, it is implemented through bipartisan policy.

Missing a critical opportunity to display his leadership, President-elect Biden failed to reject the white supremacy embedded within the US government by stating, "[We need a Republican Party. We need an opposition that is principled and strong.](#)" Shifting the focus to "unity" dismisses acknowledging the historical legacy of racism that has impacted the communities that elected him to office, enabling this violence to occur again without any real consequences.

The proposed immigration plan for the Biden-Harris administration, [The Biden Plan for Securing Our Values as a Nation of Immigrants](#), opens with the one-sentence acknowledgment of a horrendous tragedy—one that occurs frequently on the US-Mexico border, but is rarely captured or denounced in mainstream US media—the [death of Salvadoran migrants Óscar Alberto Martínez](#)



[Ramírez and his almost-two-year-old daughter, Valeria](#). Both were found lying dead along the Río Grande as they attempted to cross the border from Mexico to the United States. The document proceeds to rightfully condemn the Trump administration's "cruel and senseless policies," which have resulted in the incarceration and deaths of many. However, Biden's platform not only fails to even name the victims, Óscar and Valeria, but also to acknowledge the ongoing role of the United States, under both Republican and Democrat administrations, [in creating the conditions they were forced to flee in the first place.](#)

Although Biden's platform condemns the cages the Trump administration is using to separate families, it is important to highlight that these cages were originally built under the Obama-Biden administration in 2014 when thousands of unaccompanied children and women from Central America arrived at the US border seeking asylum. That year, the Obama administration requested a [\\$3.7 billion supplemental appropriation](#) to "secure additional space that [would satisfy] applicable legal and humanitarian standards for detention of adults with children." Deterrence was a top focus for Obama's funding request and was defined by his administration as, "increased detainment and removal of adults with children and increased immigration court capacity to speed cases." While the appropriation did not pass in 2014, the Obama administration did successfully [expand family detention](#) and, in 2015, Congress appropriated ["\\$3.4 billion to ICE for detection, enforcement,](#)

5%
U.S. CITIZENSHIP & IMMIGRATION SERVICES (USCIS)

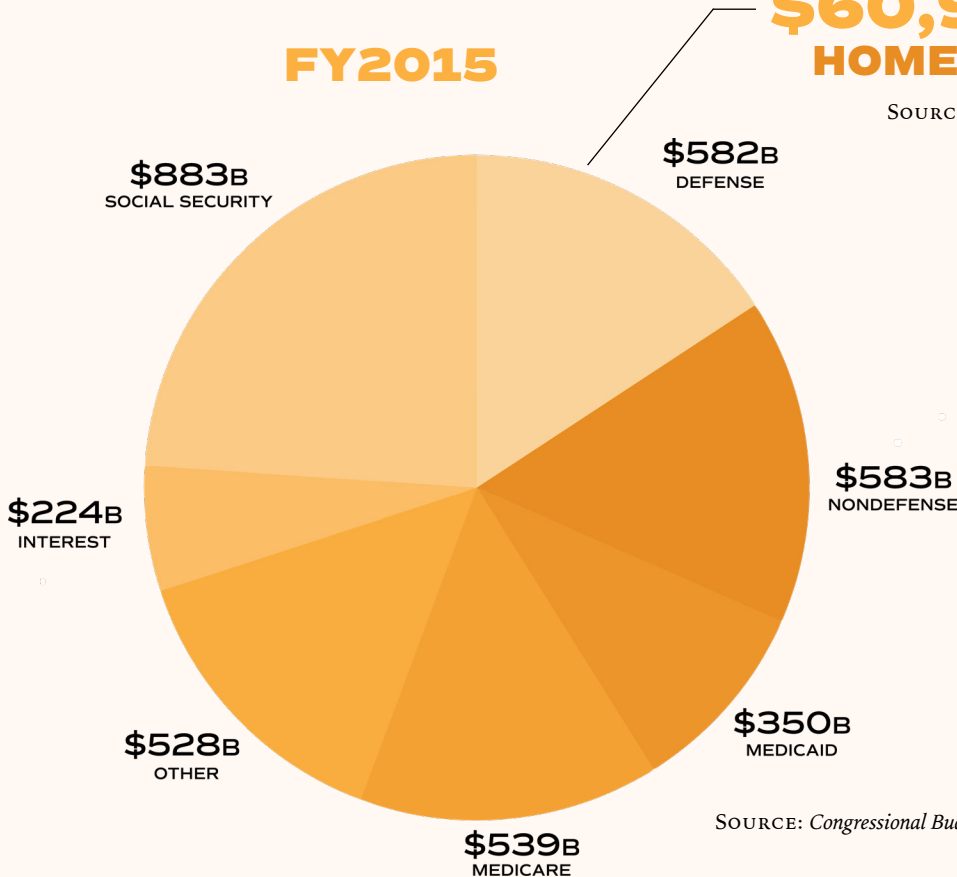
9%
U.S. IMMIGRATION & CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT (ICE)

12%
TRANSPORTATION SECURITY ADMINISTRATION(TSA)

21%
U.S. CUSTOMS & BORDER PROTECTION (CBP)

\$60,918,787,000
HOMELAND SECURITY

SOURCE: DHS Budget-in-Brief Fiscal Year 2015



SOURCE: Congressional Budget Office: The Federal Budget in 2015

[and removal operations, including \\$23.7 million for the transport of unaccompanied children for CBP.](#)" These actions laid the infrastructure for the Trump administration, including his senior advisor Stephen Miller, previously [linked to supporting white nationalism](#), to continue denying basic human rights to migrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees.

Furthermore, Biden's plan denounces, "Trump has waged an unrelenting assault on our values and our history as a nation of immigrants." It continues, "Unless your ancestors were native to these shores, or forcibly enslaved and brought here as part of our original sin as a nation, most Americans can trace their family history back to a choice." This contradictory statement attempts to place the emphasis on an individual's choice to migrate, absolving the structural forces at play in creating forced displacement all around the world. Moreover, the document neglects to acknowledge the atrocious genocide, [the broken treaties, and the land which remains unceded](#) that made it possible for the United States to become the settler-colonial¹ state it is today. We must challenge narratives that describe this territory as a "nation of immigrants" and therefore invisibilize the histories and struggles of Indigenous people as well as acknowledge that the conditions many people are forced to flee from today have been in part created by US interventionism.

Central to Biden's immigration platform is addressing the "root causes" of what he terms "irregular" (a euphemism for "illegal") migration from Central America through [The Biden Plan to Build Security and Prosperity in Partnership with the People of Central America](#). However, we argue that this plan does not reflect his proposed commitment to "ensuring that the nations of Central America—especially El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, the Northern Triangle coun-

tries—are strong, secure, and capable of delivering futures of opportunity for their own people," but instead, it will continue to enact harmful policies that have been proven to exacerbate forced displacement and caused the countless deaths of migrants inside and outside US borders.

¹ SETTLER COLONIALISM: *A distinct form of colonialism which describes a state's assertion of sovereignty over Indigenous lands through permanent settlement and the elimination and erasure of Indigenous peoples.*

**THIS POLICY REPORT
CONTEXTUALIZES AND
ANALYZES EACH OF THE
POINTS DELINEATED IN THE
BIDEN-HARRIS PLAN FOR
CENTRAL AMERICA:**



1.

DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE FOUR-YEAR, \$4 BILLION REGIONAL STRATEGY TO ADDRESS FACTORS DRIVING MIGRATION FROM CENTRAL AMERICA

As the first point of his plan for Central America, Biden proposes a \$4 billion strategy that would be funded with money [“from the Department of Homeland Security's budget for detention, which has skyrocketed under Trump's inhumane and unnecessary policies, in favor of more effective and cost-efficient alternatives to detention.”](#) While Biden's plan refutes Trump's “draconian” immigration policies, his proposed solution does not address the fact that people seeking refuge should not experience any form of “alternative” detention, coded language for other insidious forms of tracking and virtual detention, possibly including [electronic monitoring devices](#). The only sensible alternative to stop the inhumane treatment of migrants is to [defund and dissolve Immigration and Customs Enforcement \(ICE\)](#).

Imbued with a tone of paternalism², Biden's strategy for increased intervention as a way to “improve” conditions disregards how, historically, US foreign policy has been central to destabilizing the region and creating forced migration in the first place. The \$4 billion strategy, almost identical to the [2015 Obama-era \\$1 billion assistance plan](#), bolsters a neoliberal³ development plan that will end up largely benefitting private investors at the expense of impoverished workers and rural *campesinos* (peasants), the majority of them Indigenous.

² PATERNALISM: *A practice that sustains an oppressive power relation, in which a state or government in a position of power interferes against the autonomy of another state or peoples, under the pretense that they are incapable of knowing their true interests and therefore justifying the limitation of their freedom.*

³ NEOLIBERALISM: *A political and economic system centered on unrestricted free-market global capitalism where the market is the organizing principle for all political, social, and economic decisions.*

2.

MOBILIZING PRIVATE INVESTMENT IN THE REGION

Biden's plan asserts that ["economies will only grow sustainably by attracting greater private investment,"](#) and paternalistically volunteers his administration to ["harness private sector investment to promote economic stability and job creation in Central America."](#) More specifically, the plan proposes to facilitate private sector investments in the region by "working with multilateral development banks, such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), to develop infrastructure and promote foreign investment by engaging with the private sector in a cost-effective and competitive manner." This "investment" approach, however, is not new. It is a continuation of what the US government has been doing for decades in countries like Honduras where, as author and journalist Belén Fernández describes, ["the post-coup privatisation binge, mega 'development' projects entailing land grabs and environmental despoliation, and other US-backed neoliberal experiments \[have resulted\] in mass impoverishment and communal displacement."](#)

When examining the failure of [Biden's 2014 Alliance for Prosperity \(A4P\) Initiative](#), a plan likewise proposed under the guise of promoting development as a cause-based approach to Central American migration, it becomes evident that this "new" plan is part of a long-term bipartisan strategy to secure US hegemony⁴ in the region. According to Alexander Main, Director of International Policy at the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington, the Alliance for Prosperity resulted in ["increasingly militarized police forces and military forces involved in countless human rights abuses, including the assassination of activists like Berta Cáceres in Honduras."](#)

Biden's plan openly states, "Maximizing our trade and commercial deals also generates greater economic opportunities for U.S. businesses and investors. The U.S. is the primary source of foreign direct investment in Central America." This is a glaring reminder of how US tax dollars have been used to safeguard the interests of the US oligarchy⁵ in the region for decades.

Historically, the US government has facilitated the presence of extractive⁶ corporations in Central America. [Chiquita Brands International](#), founded in 1899 as United Fruit Company by American businessman Lorenzo Dow Baker, is one of the countless

examples of corporations that have seized lands, exploited workers, and utilized race to the bottom⁷ strategies in Latin America. For instance, [the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement \(CAFTA-DR FTA\)](#), an agreement signed by George W. Bush in 2005 that failed to deliver the "economic growth" it promised, has instead resulted in many negative outcomes, such as [monopolizing access to affordable medicine, drastically decreasing worker protections, and, as reported by several watchdog organizations, becoming a driving factor of forced migration in the region.](#)

In his current plan, Biden states that he will continue enforcing CAFTA-DR, "including ensuring that labor practices do not disadvantage competition," ultimately prioritizing the interests of US businesses and investors over the lives and basic human rights of people. This approach will ensure that workers [have little to no labor protections](#) so that corporations attain maximum profit.

⁴ HEGEMONY: *The political, economic, or military dominance of a state over another.*

⁵ OLIGARCHY: *A power structure in which a small and elite group of people have power.*

⁶ EXTRACTIVISM: *The exploitation of natural resources on a mass scale for economic gain upheld by the world market, without concern for the impacts of its practices or sustainability.*

⁷ RACE TO THE BOTTOM: *A competitive undercutting of labor standards, environmental standards, wages, or tax rates by companies against each other in the pursuit to attract and retain foreign capital within the market.*

3.

IMPROVING SECURITY
& RULE OF LAW

As a third point in this “comprehensive strategy” for Central America, Biden promises to bring “safety” to the region by [“strengthening security and establishing confidence in the rule of law.”](#) More specifically, he proposes that, “Investing in improving professional standards and training for police and security forces in the region is key to ensuring that public safety, in partnership with communities, is prioritized.” Yet, history reveals that one of the primary ways in which the United States has intervened and increasingly destabilized other countries, particularly in the Global South, has been under the pretense of improving security by providing [training to police and military forces](#), such as [the TIGRES Honduras](#).

For instance, the [US Army School of the Americas \(SOA\)](#), now the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) in Columbus, Georgia, is “a combat training institution with the ostensible aim of instructing Latin American militaries in control tactics over armed counter-insurgent groups.” Founded in the [Panama Canal Zone](#) in 1946, the school trained some of Latin America’s most heinous dictators who presided administrations that routinely violated international human rights, including Hugo Banzer Suárez (Bolivia), Roberto D’Aubuisson (El Salvador), Leopoldo Galtieri (Argentina), Juan Alberto Melgar Castro (Honduras), Efraín Ríos Montt (Guatemala), Manuel Noriega (Panama), and Jorge Rafael Videla (Argentina) to name just a few. Some of the students, such as Heriberto ‘The Executioner’ Lazcano and Arturo ‘Zeta

One’ Guzmán Decena, used their “skills” to develop networks of organized crime and [founded the Zetas drug cartel in Mexico.](#)

In September 1996, [seven SOA training manuals were released by the Pentagon](#), which revealed, “detailed techniques for infiltrating social movements, interrogating suspects, surveillance, maintaining military secrecy, recruiting and retaining spies, and controlling the population.” Some of the most egregious techniques included in these manuals advocated for torture, execution, and blackmail. To this day, WHINSEC promotes US exceptionalism⁸ by stating that trainees should be instructed in [“knowledge and understanding of United States customs and traditions”](#) in their mission statement.

US-led training programs have equipped police and military forces in various parts of the world with the skills to use modernized surveillance tools and weapons for the ongoing repression of their populations. According to a report published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the United States [“was responsible for 34 percent of the entire world’s arms exports from 2013 to 2017,” making it the largest exporter of weapons globally.](#) War has become a staple US business and political campaigns, both Democrat and Republican, are in [part funded through these profits.](#)

However, arms sales and police training programs are not unique to US-Latin American relations. The United States police and military have exchanged many of their tactics of force and mass surveillance with Israel’s national police, military, and intelligence services. [The American Defense League \(ADL\), the Jewish Institute for National Security of America \(JINSA\), and the Georgia International Law Enforcement Exchange](#) are examples of US-sponsored programs that have invited US officials and local police chiefs to be trained on [tactics of repression and the use of surveillance technology.](#) Many of these tactics and technology have been first tested on the Palestinian population under occupation.

Similar to Palestine, Belén Fernández [highlights](#) that many countries in Latin America “have found themselves on the receiving end of Israel’s arsenal,” [citing](#) investigative journalist Jeremy Bigwood who highlighted, “Israel’s military relations with right-wing groups and regimes spans Latin America from Mexico to the southernmost tip of Chile, starting just a few years after the Israeli state came into existence.” Bigwood focuses particularly on Guatemala, where Israel was complicit in “the bloodiest counter-insurgency

campaign the hemisphere has known since the European conquest, in which at least 200,000 (mostly Indians) were killed” and a million people displaced. As Fernández keenly notes, “global insecurity is fundamental to Israel’s growth.”

This strategy of increased militarization has been employed to secure governance over Latin America. It has only aided the ongoing repression, killings, and disappearances of activists, Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous land defenders, and anyone who opposes the government and investors, foreign and domestic.

⁸ US EXCEPTIONALISM: *An ideology that views the United States as “unique” and “different” from the rest of the world on the basis of its “democratic ideals” and personal freedoms, therefore, giving it the responsibility to make the world a better place through whatever means deemed necessary by the state.*

4.

ADDRESSING ENDEMIC CORRUPTION

The plan refers to Biden as a “long-time vocal proponent of anti-corruption efforts around the world, including in the Northern Triangle” and blames the Trump administration for “[undercutting] U.S. moral leadership on [combating corruption],” describing it as “the most corrupt Administration in modern American history.” However, US involvement in the region under both Democrat and Republican administrations has in fact contributed to corruption in the Northern Triangle.

Biden's attempt to market himself as the “anti-corruption” candidate is unconvincing to many who remember the role the Obama-Biden administration played in supporting [the 2009 coup in Honduras](#) and the [subsequent effects the coup has had in the country](#). US government officials were involved in ousting then democratically-elected President Manuel Zelaya who was [deemed a threat to foreign and domestic corporate interests](#). The Minister of Culture under President Zelaya, Manuel Pastor, stated, “American mining companies complained they were not being treated as they wanted [since] open pit mining had been prohibited, and petroleum companies could have complained as well, since they were losing their monopoly.” As president, Zelaya had “raised the minimum wage by 60 percent, offered subsidies to small farmers, and lowered interest rates” as well as prioritized other domestic reforms.

In an unsurprising outcome, the US-backed coup brought to power corrupt officials, in-

cluding Porfirio Lobo (president of Honduras from 2010-2014) and current president Juan Orlando Hernández (JOH), who conspired to use [“drug trafficking to help assert power and control in Honduras.”](#) They did this alongside [Juan Antonio “Tony” Hernández](#), former Honduran congressman and brother of JOH, who was convicted and imprisoned in New York for conspiring to import cocaine and [“possessing machine guns in furtherance of, the cocaine-importation conspiracy”](#) into the United States. Despite these allegations, Biden's plan proposes increasing funding to governments such as JOH's, which makes clear that his allegiance is not with the people of Honduras, as the plan's title claims, but in service of transnational corporate interests.

Following the echoes of increased US intervention and militarization, the plan further proposes to, “[Increase] the presence of U.S. Justice and Treasury Department attachés at our Embassies in Central America to better fight organized crime and illicit activity, and creating a new office as part of the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) to investigate corruption in the Northern Triangle.” Given the history of colonialism, racialization⁹, capitalism, and US imperialism, we can assume that this new office will function as yet another harmful tool of surveillance and population control.

⁹ RACIALIZATION: *A political process of ascribing ethnic or racial identities to a relationship, social practice, or group*

5.

PRIORITIZING POVERTY REDUCTION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Lastly, Biden's plan asserts that, "U.S. development aid is a vital investment not just in the success of the region, but in our own future security and prosperity." As a first point, it suggests, "Addressing food insecurity as a root cause of migration by investing in programs that combat malnutrition in the Northern Triangle, particularly in Guatemala's Western Highlands and in the dry corridor along the Pacific coast of Central America." Yet, malnutrition is merely a symptom, and not a root cause. The dry corridor is an area [heavily affected by the climate crisis](#) and [1.4 million people reportedly live in need of food aid](#) since their lands no longer produce enough to feed their families. Minimal environmental regulations and the shrinkage of worker's labor protections have allowed corporations to [poison farmlands, extract natural goods \(commodified as resources\), build toxic mines](#), and legally exploit the labor of workers in Central America.

The plan offers to:

"[Strengthen] U.S. investments in reintegrating returning migrants to ensure these individuals do not once again undertake the dangerous trek north. Biden will work with the private and non-profit sector in the Northern Triangle to target these individuals for job training and prevention programs, many of whom have gained valuable skills – including English-language skills."

To begin with, the term "returning migrants" can be understood as a euphemism for a group of people composed largely of migrants who have been deported and those who have re-

turned to their communities after experiencing significant hardships in the United States, such as racial discrimination, social isolation, and labor exploitation. The job and prevention programs are thus posed as a solution to discourage these "returning migrants" from "[undertaking] the dangerous trek north;" however, this approach disregards that the reason why the trek North is dangerous is precisely because the US government has [increasingly militarized the US-Mexico border \(at a profit\)](#) and supported the militarization of the [Mexico-Guatemala border](#). These actions have pushed migrants to pursue more dangerous routes in areas controlled by organized crime and led to the disappearances and deaths of many, including Óscar and Valeria.

The plan proposes to prioritize "developing human capital" by investing in job training programs for "returning migrants" and youth. Yet, the mere fact that human beings are only regarded for their labor potential reveals that the US government's primary focus is to protect the economic interests of US corporations in the region. Many of the people who receive these types of trainings may end up working in [maquiladoras](#), foreign-run factories where workers are met with discrimination, unlawful working conditions, wage theft, and salaries below a living wage. The callousness of this political discourse, centering workers' individual actions as the root cause of their displacement, shifts focus away from global powers and national actors.

WHEN REFERRING TO THE ROOT CAUSES OF MIGRATION, WE CANNOT MERELY THINK ABOUT THE SYMPTOMS, LIKE VIOLENCE, POVERTY, OR EVEN THE CLIMATE CRISIS, BUT RATHER, THE REAL FACTORS THAT HAVE CAUSED THOSE SYMPTOMS. WE AT *MIGRANT ROOTS MEDIA* BELIEVE THAT THOSE ROOT CAUSES INCLUDE THE NEOLIBERAL ECONOMIC POLICIES THAT HAVE BEEN IMPLEMENTED IN THE REGION FOR DECADES AND WHICH WILL CONTINUE IF THIS PLAN IS IMPLEMENTED.

GUIDED BY THIS ANALYSIS OF THE ROOT CAUSES OF MIGRATION, BELOW ARE SOME INITIAL STEPS THAT CAN BE TAKEN IN THE LONG FIGHT FOR LIBERATION. THIS LIST WAS DRAFTED IN COLLABORATION WITH CONTRIBUTORS AND SUPPORTERS OF MIGRANT ROOTS MEDIA AND IS NOT EXHAUSTIVE. IT WILL CONTINUE TO BE UPDATED WITH THE INPUT OF DIRECTLY IMPACTED COMMUNITIES

[CLICK HERE TO SUBMIT YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS:](#)

INTERNATIONAL

BY US GOVERNMENT:

- Pass the [Berta Cáceres Human Rights Act, H.R. 1945](#)
- Stop financing all military and police forces in Central America
- Close all US military bases in the region
- [Stop all flow of money from the United States to Central America](#)
- End US military and diplomatic support to Israel
- Release Central American countries from Free Trade Agreements
- End Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), otherwise known as the [Remain in Mexico policy](#)
- Revoke the [Safe Third Country agreements](#)
- Support the reinstatement of CICIG (Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala)
- Immediate halt of the construction of the US-Mexico border wall
- Close down all immigrant jails (detention centers)
- Offer refugee status to "climate refugees"

BY GENERAL PUBLIC:

- Uplift the voices and support the actions of people struggling and/or organizing to stay and thrive in their homelands
- Support Indigenous communities and movements
- Support victims of hurricanes ETA and IOTA

NATIONAL

BY US GOVERNMENT:

- Offer residency with a path to citizenship to all undocumented people (including TPS holders)
- [Close WHINSEC](#) and end all training programs
- Defund the police and abolish ICE

BY GENERAL PUBLIC:

- Uplift the voices and support the actions of directly affected migrants and children of migrants
- Support mutual aid efforts and [stimulus redistribution](#) to migrants left out of COVID-19 relief.
- Support the national and local [#FreeThemAll](#) campaigns

THE ANALYSIS OF DIRECTLY AFFECTED PEOPLE IS CRITICAL TO CONTINUE FLESHING OUT THE IDEAS EXPRESSED IN THIS REPORT. IF YOU'D LIKE TO CONTRIBUTE A PIECE (ARTICLE, POEM, VIDEO, PHOTOGRAPH, ETC.), TO *MIGRANT ROOTS MEDIA*, PLEASE [CLICK HERE](#).



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