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Who Seeks to Exit? Security, Connections, and Happiness as Predictors of Migration Intentions in the Americas

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Executive Summary. Migration patterns have featured prominently on the agendas of politicians, analysts, and researchers for decades. However, current research on the instigating forces of migration relies heavily on theoretical or single-case studies rather than cross-national empirical analyses. For this reason, we use various questions from the 2010 AmericasBarometer survey to investigate why people desire to move away from or stay in their home country. Building upon the existing literature, we analyze people's desire to emigrate from 24 countries in the Americas. The results reveal that happiness is a key factor in a decision to emigrate. In addition, considering the sample as a whole, we find that the most educated individuals are among the most likely to leave. People who have been victimized in the past, who believe the country is struggling economically, who have relatives abroad, and who have weaker ties to home also exhibit a higher inclination to leave. Finally, and perhaps slightly troubling for many countries, the youngest members of society are the most likely to leave of any age group.

LAPOP is pleased to note that this report was developed and written by Vanderbilt undergraduate students participating in a Vanderbilt University honors seminar (HONS186, taught by Professor E. J. Zechmeister). Biographies of the authors are provided in the report appendix.

The Insights Series is co-edited by Mitchell A. Seligson, Amy Erica Smith, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister with administrative, technical, and intellectual support from the LAPOP group at Vanderbilt.
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High levels of emigration can exact numerous economic, political, and social costs. For example, emigration can cause brain drain and its consequent economic challenges, disruptions to familial and other social networks, and political conflicts with receiving countries. Indeed, a number of Latin American and Caribbean countries find themselves struggling to retain their citizens and have considered or created various incentives to either keep citizens in the country or to bring them back home (Pellegrino 2000 and 2001; Koser 2010). Policies designed to curb emigration have been debated in a number of countries, including Uruguay, where it was reported that approximately one-fifth of its nationals were living abroad in 2005 (Gotkine 2005). In recent years, many countries within Latin America have found themselves for the first time as major recipients of immigrants, often from other Latin American countries (Orcés 2009, 2010). Given the political salience and relevance of migration to the Americas, it is important to assess this question: To what extent do individuals across the Americas desire to emigrate, and why?

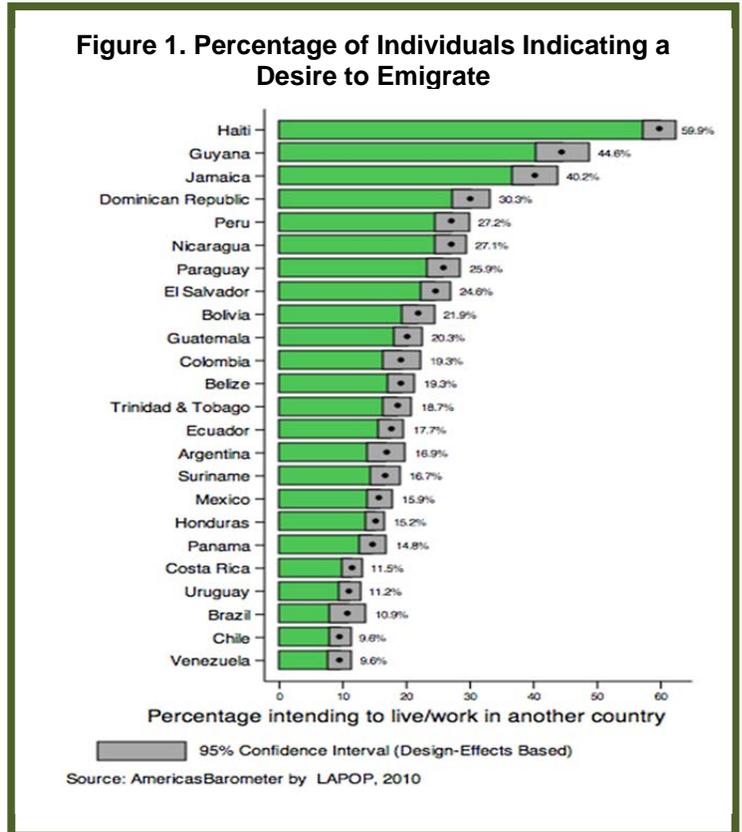
In this *Insights* report, we first seek to describe the desire for emigration among citizens.¹ We then attempt to identify some of the leading sources of this desire; in particular, we highlight the importance of age, security, social connections, and overall happiness to explaining the intention to exit. Our report focuses primarily on this question from the 2010 AmericasBarometer survey² by LAPOP:

Q14. Do you have any intention of going to live or work in another country in the next three years?

¹ Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>
The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop>

² Funding for the 2010 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University.

Figure 1 displays the results to this “yes/no” question across 24 countries in the Americas.³ The dots on each bar on the graph indicate the percentage of respondents who answered “yes,” with gray areas indicating 95% confidence intervals.



Overall, we see wide variance in the response pattern across countries. Values in the graph range from a low of 9.6% in Venezuela to a high of 59.9% in Haiti, the only country where the percentage of affirmative responses exceeds the 50% mark. The relatively high percentage of Haitians seeking to emigrate is likely due to past migration patterns being exacerbated by the 2010 earthquake, which could have led many citizens to seek opportunities outside of their devastated country (Wasem 2010). The fact that approximately 20% or more of citizens in half

³ The question was not asked in the United States and Canada. The rate of non-response to this particular question among the sample of survey participants is 3.2%.

the countries surveyed answered in the affirmative is striking. This means that, on average, a fifth of the population desires to leave their home country within the next few years.⁴

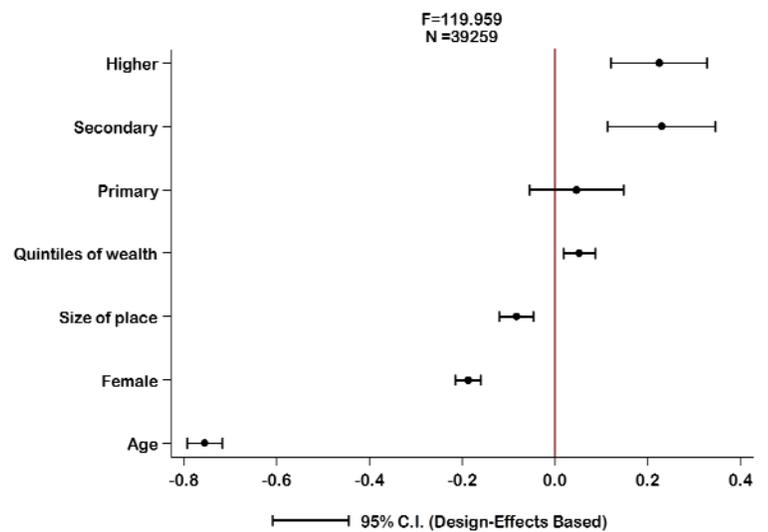
Socioeconomic and Demographic Factors as Predictors of Intentions to Emigrate

How do factors such as education, wealth, size of the town/city of residence, gender, and age affect nationals' desire to exit their home country? The current literature provides some expectations, which we assess in this section.

First, we expect to see individuals' levels of education predict their intention to move abroad. Much previous research (Levy and Wadycki 1974; Bray 1984; Rumbaut 1995; Durand et al. 2001; Pellegrino 2001) asserts that increased education tends to cause people to be more inclined to migrate from their home countries. Higher-educated people are more likely to possess the knowledge and training needed to succeed abroad and might be more cognizant of concrete opportunities to be found out of the country, due to heightened awareness of world affairs (Levy and Wadycki 1974). This is not always the case; Pellegrino (2001) cites a polarization in U.S. immigrants, with educated workers coming from South America and low-

⁴ We note, of course, that the question does not ask whether the individual would consider this move temporary or permanent. Another important consideration when evaluating these results is that the global economy was extremely poor at the time. It is possible that people may have seen less benefit from moving abroad than they might have otherwise. It is beyond the scope of our analyses, however, to determine whether the global recession directly increased, decreased, or kept constant overall preferences to emigrate in 2010 compared to prior years.

Figure 2. Socio-economic and Demographic Characteristics Predicting the Likelihood of Indicating a Desire to Emigrate, 2010



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP, 2010

Country fixed effects and intercept included but not shown here

skill workers from Central America.⁵ However, in our analyses of the region as a whole, we expect to find that the more highly educated an individual, the more likely he or she will be to desire to emigrate in the coming three years.

In addition, greater wealth should facilitate one's means to move abroad (Pellegrino 2000; *Economist* 2002). Therefore, we expect wealth to correlate positively with intentions to emigrate.⁶ To assess these expectations, and to examine the significance of gender, age, and urban versus rural residence, we ran a logistical regression analysis predicting the likelihood that an individual will express a desire to emigrate. Figure 2 shows the results of this analysis.

In Figure 2, the independent variables included in the analysis are shown along the y-axis. The effect of each variable on our dependent variable

⁵ It would be interesting to test whether and how countries vary on the extent to which education matters in emigration. However, this analysis is mostly beyond the scope of this study (but see footnote 9).

⁶ For more information about the wealth measure see Córdova (2009).

is shown with a dot. If the dot falls to the right of the vertical “0” line, the variable is positively correlated with expressing an intention to exit. If the dot falls to the left of that line, the variable has a negative effect on the respondent’s desire to emigrate in the next few years. We indicate statistical significance with lines stretching to the left and right of each dot. Only if a line does not cross over the vertical “0” line is the variable’s influence statistically significant (at .05 or better). The relative strength of each variable is indicated by standardized coefficients.

[T]ools provided by education seem to fuel intentions to move abroad.

Figure 2 shows that, indeed, education appears to have a statistically significant effect on intent to move abroad.⁷ Interestingly, primary education does not appear to provide enough of a “push” over having no education to induce someone to want to move abroad. However, at both the secondary and higher levels of education, people appear more likely to want to move abroad. As Levy and Wadycki (1974) suggested, the tools provided by education seem to fuel intentions to move abroad. These tools may include knowledge about foreign areas, skills in specialized tasks, or other general resume-building factors.

⁷ In separate analyses not shown here, we tested whether the effects of education, wealth, and age are curvi-linear (u-shaped) rather than linear. For education, there appears some evidence of a threshold effect, where possessing a secondary education or above leaves one more disposed toward exit compared to those with a primary education or none. The results for wealth were less clear (the results for the dummy variables for each quintile of wealth do not show a clear linear or curvi-linear relationship to desire to emigrate and, in the analyses related to Figure 3 in this report, wealth becomes insignificant once additional variables are included and this result holds whether wealth is measured assuming a linear relationship or as a series of dummy variables). We found clear linear results for a series of age cohort variables (see footnote 8). While some of these results may differ from findings in other scholarship, we caution that it is important to keep in mind that we are examining average effects across all of the Americas (minus the U.S. and Canada) and, per footnotes 5 and 9, we recognize results for these variables may vary across individual countries.

Somewhat surprisingly, higher wealth provides only a small (albeit statistically significant) boost in citizens’ desire to emigrate. We ran the same model with education omitted, and wealth only exhibited a slightly larger effect (closer to 0.1). This leads us to conclude that, all else equal and considering the sample as a whole, skills and knowledge exert a greater influence over one’s intention to leave his or her country than material resources.

The results also show that women (compared to men) as well as those living in larger and more urban areas are less likely to indicate a desire to move abroad. Finally, age has an overwhelmingly strong relationship to a person’s desire to move abroad. Specifically, the older someone is, the less likely they are to want to leave their homeland to move to another country. While we expected a relationship between age and desire to emigrate, we were quite surprised by this correlation, which is far larger than any of the other variables we study here. Below, we explore interpersonal trust as a proxy for social capital, because we believe that high levels of social capital built up over time may drive some, but not all, of the very strong relationship between these two variables.⁸ In the same vein, we explore the effect of having children, as another social tie that might increase with age and play a role in keeping older generations in the country.⁹

⁸ We also ran logistical regression tests separating the various age groups to determine if there was any indication of a “U-curve” relationship among the variables. In fact, age shows a consistent linear relationship. The youngest groups show the greatest likelihood to leave, and the oldest age groups show the least desire for emigration.

⁹ We also ran separate regression analyses (not shown here) for each country to test if we find the same pattern of results across the individual countries. Basically, we find quite similar results. For instance, age is a statistically significant and negative predictor for each country’s analysis. Education is positively related to desire to emigrate in each country, but this relationship is noticeably quite strong in Chile. Regarding the size of the place variable, we find greater variation across countries; in many cases, the

Beyond these basic variables, the literature indicates that some other individual factors may determine someone's likelihood to leave. Our next section investigates some of these other variables' relationships to intentions to exit.¹⁰

High Life Satisfaction, Security, and Strong Social Ties Inhibit the Decision to Leave

We contend that the likelihood of leaving rests to a large degree on citizens' general satisfaction with their current lives. Overall, if citizens are not happy with their current situation, they will take measures to improve their life, which may include searching for benefits in other countries. On the other hand, if citizens are satisfied with their current lifestyle, it seems much more likely that they will not leave the country in the near future. In assessing factors that predict intention to exit, we consider three specific indicators of well-being: security from crime and violence, economic evaluations, and social connections. In addition, we consider the effect of reported life satisfaction on an individual's desire to emigrate.

Crime and violence are both commonly discussed instigators of migration at the individual level; Pellegrino (2001) identifies violence as a key cause of permanent migration. Violence in Colombia is singled out in one article (*Economist* 2002), while Wasem (2010)

coefficients are not statistically significant, whereas for the analyses of Guyana, Argentina and Colombia we find significant, negative effects as in Figure 2. Finally, regarding quintiles of wealth, we again find that the results do not reach statistical significance in many countries; wealth seems to exert its strongest and most statistically significant effects in the cases of Panama, Haiti, Guyana, and Trinidad & Tobago.

¹⁰ In the Appendix, Figures 2 and 3 are re-created without responses from Haiti due to its outlier status with regards to percentage of respondents desiring to move abroad. As can be seen, the model stays essentially the same with or without responses from this country, and we are therefore confident that this particular country's responses are not driving the results we present here.

mentions lawlessness as a possible reason for emigration from Haiti. We reason that individuals who have recently been victimized by crime may find moving to a country perceived as safer to be an attractive option. We therefore test the effect of crime victimization on intent to exit.

In addition, we expect that the worse the perceived condition of the domestic economy, the more likely a respondent is to want to emigrate. The telling role the home economic situation plays in migration trends is identified in numerous articles (Bray 1984; Massey et. al. 1998; Pellegrino 2000 and 2001; *Economist* 2002; Koser 2010). From these we see that, historically, levels of immigration have varied in accordance with the economic health of the sending and receiving countries. If, for many people, the decision to emigrate is one primarily motivated by a desire for better economic opportunities, then we should find a negative relationship between evaluations of the national economy and one's desire to emigrate.¹¹

We also considered social connections as a factor that may influence one's desire to emigrate. There is a fair amount of literature suggesting that people are more likely to migrate to another country if they have strong social ties – meaning high social capital – with people in the foreign country (Massey & España 1987). Migration networks, the links between emigrants and their family and friends still at home, are thought to increase the chance that those left behind will move abroad (Massey & España 1987). Having an established network abroad makes the transition between two countries much easier;

¹¹ While we focus on individual evaluations here, we also assessed (in analyses not presented here) the effect of national economic growth in a hierarchical model that included all the other variables included in Figure 3. We find that the individual-level variables are in the same direction and are statistically significant. Further, the second-level variable, based on the country's GDP index, is also statistically significant and the coefficient has a negative sign, indicating that in countries with poor national economic growth, people are more likely to desire to emigrate.

after all, arriving in a new country with no way of navigating the housing market, job market, or social customs would be a significant barrier to ultimately attaining a better standard of living. In addition, having relatives successfully living abroad conveys that there are jobs with higher wages available in that foreign country, and this information is further incentive to emigrate (Massey & España 1987). Thus, we test for the effect of having relatives living abroad and expect to find a positive relationship.

While many have considered the effects of having social connections abroad, there is a dearth of research examining the relationship between domestic social connections and the intent to move to a different country. We expect that the more social connections individuals have within their home communities, the less likely they will be to want to leave. Put differently, if increased social connections abroad lead people to emigrate, then a lack of this social capital at home should leave them more willing to move away. As measures of domestic social connections, we include variables measuring interpersonal trust and whether the respondent has children.

Finally, we consider a measure of overall life satisfaction and happiness. Happiness, considered in terms of life satisfaction, appears in numerous migration-centric studies, but its relationship to emigration is notably complex (Cardenas 2009). Scholars have found country-level happiness to have a U-shaped relationship with emigration rates. Specifically, emigration rates are high for very unhappy countries, comparatively lower for countries with happiness scores in the mid-range, and then higher again for the happiest countries (Polgreen and Simpson 2010). The primary hypothesis put forth by Polgreen and Simpson is that people in happier countries are more optimistic and thus perceive benefits in the opportunities they see abroad; the desire of people in the least happy countries to emigrate is more intuitive. The significant effect of happiness levels has been shown to be robust to

controls for effects of income and other economic welfare measures (Polgreen and Simpson 2010). While this research is focused on aggregate measures of happiness (at the country level), we will examine the relationship between happiness reported at the individual level and desire to emigrate.

To assess expectations yielded by the above discussion, we conducted a new logistic regression analysis, which includes the socioeconomic and demographic variables from the Figure 2 analysis as well as indicators of crime victimization¹², national economic evaluations¹³, having relatives abroad¹⁴, having children, interpersonal trust¹⁵, and overall life satisfaction (“life rating”).¹⁶ The model also included country fixed effects and controls not shown but reported in the Appendix.

¹² VIC1EXT asks if the respondent has been the victim of any sort of crime in the past twelve months, citing robbery, burglary, assault, fraud, blackmail, extortion, and violent threats as possible manifestations of crime activity. In Figure 3, “no victimization” is the base category.

¹³ The SOCT1 variable in Figure 3 measures the respondent's perception of the national economic situation, with possible responses of the economic situation at present being “very good,” “good,” “neither good nor bad,” “bad or very bad.” For analytic purposes, this question is recoded so that higher values mean better evaluations.

¹⁴ This figure is based off question Q10C of the LAPOP survey. The responses – initially given on a scale of 1-4 to indicate how many relatives were living abroad – were recoded to values of either 0 or 1 with 0 indicating that the respondent had no family abroad and 1 signaling the opposite.

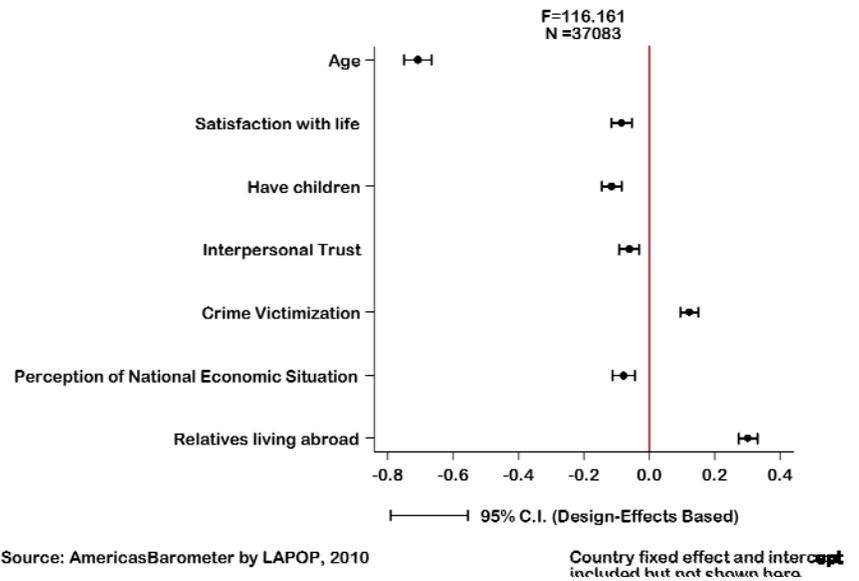
¹⁵ We coded “interpersonal trust” (IT1) on a 0 to 1 scale where 0 is no trust and 1 is a very high level. For “having children,” we coded “no children” as 0 and combined all answers involving any number of children as 1.

¹⁶ LS3, the first non-demographic question asked in the survey, reads: “To begin, in general how satisfied are you with your life? Would you say that you are: very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied.” It is coded here so that higher values indicate more satisfaction. As a robustness check, we ran an analysis excluding all factors except those included in Figure 2 and we find that the substantive effect of life satisfaction increases, albeit in only a modest amount, which is suggestive of the idea that life satisfaction partially mediates the effects of some of the other variables included in Figure 3.

Figure 3 presents the results of this logistical regression analysis. As exhibited, experience with crime victimization is significantly and positively correlated with intention to exit the country. We also find that economic perception is significantly and negatively correlated with intention to exit; if a person perceives the national economy to be strong, he or she is less likely to express a desire to leave the country. While this falls in line with our prediction, it is worth noting that the effect is fairly small in size; indeed, there are other variables whose effects overshadow economic perceptions. In exploring the argument about economic conditions mattering from a different perspective, we ran an additional model (not shown here) that included personal economic perceptions along with national economic perception; it exhibited a result of similar strength, again showing that a positive personal economic situation decreases the likelihood of desiring to exit, but other factors play just as large and larger roles.

Figure 3 also shows results for how having relatives living abroad affects respondents' intentions to follow suit. As can be seen, there is a noticeable positive correlation between having relatives abroad and intent to do the same. This result supports our expectation and reinforces a central premise underlying migration network theory. Turning to domestic social connections, Figure 3 indicates that both high interpersonal trust and having children show slight negative correlations with their desire to exit. We therefore believe that social capital does determine in part the decision to emigrate. We also suspect that this finding may explain some of the effect age has on the decision to emigrate. Younger people are less rooted in their hometowns than older people, and thus the decision to emigrate would lead to less of a

Figure 3. Life Satisfaction, Economic Evaluations, Crime Victimization, and Social Capital Predicting the Likelihood of Indicating a Desire to Emigrate, 2010



sacrifice in terms of losing personal friendships or leaving behind children.¹⁷

Finally, as expected, satisfaction with life has a statistically significant and negative effect on intention to exit; higher reported happiness is shown to make Latin American residents less likely to seek to emigrate elsewhere. Admittedly, the effect of the measure is not as large as we expected.¹⁸ It may be that, at the individual level, the effect of happiness on intention to leave takes a U-shape such that very happy and unhappy people are most likely to seek to emigrate, while positions in the middle

¹⁷ Comparing the effects for age across the analyses shown in Figures 2 and 3, we see that the impact of age decreases only slightly when interpersonal trust and having children are included. While these specific factors, then, may alone not be driving the strong effect of age, we nonetheless suspect that deeper social and economic roots among older individuals, possibly in combination with lower propensities to take risks, account for much of the effect we find for age.

¹⁸ It is likely that other variables controlled for in the model, such as perception of economic climate, age, crime victimization, children and interpersonal trust contribute to life satisfaction and, therefore, some of the effect of happiness is captured through these more specific measures in the model (see also footnote 16).

exhibit the greatest disinclination to seek to leave. In this case, the ends of the U-curve may effectively “balance” out the center of the U-curve, masking the effects of either group and leaving just a small negative correlation. Such an effect at the individual level would mirror findings discussed earlier at the country level. Assessing this expectation is beyond the scope of this paper, but we note that it may be a promising line of analysis for future scholarship to consider.

Conclusions

In this report, we examined various factors that affect whether someone professes a desire to move abroad in the near future. We find that people’s intentions to move abroad are based in experiences and beliefs related to their own life situation, the connections they have, and the situation of their country as a whole. At its core, this research into migration patterns and their causes is founded upon individual happiness. Factors that theoretically would affect life satisfaction, and the general measure of happiness itself, have important effects on an individual’s intention to exit.

On average, our results confirm what much of the research into Latin American public opinion has told us over the last few decades. For example, several sources (Levy and Wadycki 1974; Pellegrino 2001) claim that higher levels of education typically drive people to emigrate, and our results are consistent with this perspective. The literature also identifies wealth as an important predictor, and our results that show that, overall, the poor are less likely to emigrate, are in accord with that research. Interesting to us was the massive effect that age has, an effect that admittedly surpassed what we expected at the outset.

We also examined several other key individual and contextual factors to determine whether

they influence emigration. People who have been victimized previously, who believe the national economy is in poor shape, who have relatives living abroad, and who have weak ties to home are much more likely to express a preference for going abroad. In conclusion, positive life experiences and perceptions matter. The simple truth is that, generally speaking, those who are not happy are more inclined to express a desire to “vote with their feet.”

[T]hose who are not happy are quite likely to express a desire to “vote with their feet.”

The most important lessons to take away from this report are the policy implications. If countries

want to avoid losing important human capital with economic, social and political externalities, they must convince individuals that life at home is good or has potential to improve. While economic conditions matter, they are not the only factors at hand. Introducing stronger ties to home by promoting community interaction may convince individuals of the benefits of staying home. In short, building strong and safe communities at the present appears to be an excellent way to develop important bonds that may avoid significant “brain drain” in the future.

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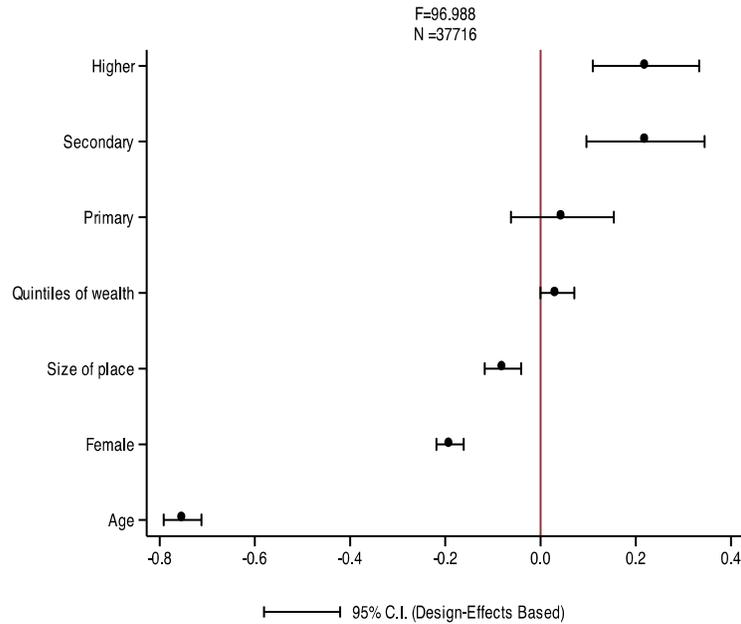
Appendix A: Analysis

Figure A1. Analysis from Original Figure 3 Excluding Haiti



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP, 2010

Figure A2. Analysis from Original Figure 2 Excluding Haiti



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP, 2010

Table A1. Logistic Model of Desire to Migrate (Design Effect Adjusted)¹⁹

Variables	Coefficient	t-value
Relatives Living Abroad	0.303*	20.23
Perception of National Economic Situation	-0.078*	-4.48
Crime Victimization	0.123*	8.69
Interpersonal Trust	-0.061*	-3.91
Have Children	-0.115*	-7.32
Satisfaction with Life	-0.084*	-5.26
Age	-0.708*	-33.02
Female	-0.164*	-10.86
Size of Place	-0.051*	-2.62
Quintiles of Wealth	0.015	0.84
Primary Education	0.024	0.46
Secondary Education	0.188*	3.07
Higher Education	0.175*	3.21
Mexico	0.024	1.04
Guatemala	0.079*	3.48
El Salvador	0.117*	5.53
Honduras	0.013	0.58
Nicaragua	0.113*	5.35
Costa Rica	-0.024	-1.01
Panama	0.026	1.18
Colombia	0.074*	3.11
Ecuador	0.055	1.88
Bolivia	0.155*	3.84
Peru	0.148*	6.82
Paraguay	0.132*	6.07
Chile	-0.053	-1.83
Brazil	-0.024	-0.60
Venezuela	-0.058*	-2.27
Argentina	0.007	0.31
Dominican Republic	0.226*	10.35
Haiti	0.379*	15.97
Jamaica	0.283*	11.30
Guyana	0.323*	13.82
Trinidad and Tobago	0.050*	2.16
Belize	0.069*	3.09
Suriname	-0.004	-0.16
Constant	-1.671*	-77.10
<i>Number of Observations</i>	37,083	
<i>F</i>	116.16	

Note: Coefficients from weighted linear regression are significant at *p < .05.

¹⁹ Uruguay is the country of reference.

Appendix B: Author Biographies*

Alexandra Arnold is a senior at Vanderbilt University and a member of the College Scholars (Honors) Program. She is double majoring in Economics and Public Health. She is serving as the Executive Director of Nashville Mobile Market, a student-run social enterprise venture that brings a mobile grocery store into lower-income Nashville communities that lack access to healthy and affordable food. She's also a board member of Vanderbilt's Alternative Spring Break service program, which recently sent 440 students on service trips, and teaches a nutrition class to Bhutanese refugees. After graduation, she is staying in Nashville to work for Ascension Health before pursuing a Master's in Economic Development.

Paul Hamilton is a senior at Vanderbilt University and a member of the College Scholars (Honors) Program. He is majoring in Economics and earning a double minor in Spanish and Financial Economics. He is a current member of Sigma Alpha Epsilon where he actively serves on the fraternity's community service committee to organize volunteer projects around the Nashville area. After graduation, he will pursue a Masters of Science in Finance at the Vanderbilt Owen Graduate School of Management.

Jimmy Moore is a senior at Vanderbilt University and a member of the College Scholars (Honors) Program. He is majoring in Political Science and Classical Languages. He is the current President and Team Captain of the Vanderbilt Mock Trial Team. In addition, he is an active member of the Presbyterian Student Fellowship at Vanderbilt and volunteers for various political figures and events. After graduation, he intends to pursue a Juris Doctorate degree.

** Author names are listed alphabetically. Arturo Maldonado, a graduate student in Political Science at Vanderbilt University, acted as a technical consultant on this report.*