

Corruption and Emigration

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Abstract

Humanitarian crises across the globe caused by economic failures have forced millions to flee their home countries. This mass migration has impacted the United States, global organizations, and many other countries straining resources and prompting policy responses. This paper argues that corruption, particularly the misallocation of public funds, creates economic instability and governance failures, with the main effect leading to migrants fleeing their homes in search of another. In our paper, we will employ a cross-sectional time series analysis using data from the Corruption Perception Index (CPI), the World Bank, and international migration databases to test this argument. This study contributes to the literature on political corruption and migration by establishing a causal link between governance failures and forced displacement, thus our findings suggest actions against corruption at the source are crucial to stop the migration crisis around the world.

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1 Introduction

In April 2013, Nicolas Maduro was announced as the winner of the Venezuelan presidential election. Many Venezuelan citizens were optimistic and hoped he would help the country recover. However, soon after taking office, Maduro instituted a high number of authoritarian laws and other policies that benefited him, and eventually, the enactment of poor policy led to economic downturn within the country causing a mass devaluation of their currency. During Maduro's presidency, the country's rating on the Democratic index dropped to a staggering rating of 2.3.(Roser and Our World Data 2024) By 2021, more than half a million Venezuelans fled to the United States.(UNHCR 2024) This massive influx in migration ended up drawing many questions, but overall, the common sentiment seems to affirm the belief that corruption is the main cause.

In many ways, corruption is a large factor in pushing people out of a country, and in the case of Venezuela, corruption has managed to continue rising. Within Venezuela, power has been consolidated at the very top with the sole purpose of benefiting Maduro, this has led to many issues as the government is in complete control of the economy. This power shift has caused a failure to bring money into the country while also causing mass inflation. Maduro's need to hold on to power by any means necessary has led to incarceration for many Venezuelan citizens (Antillano, Pojomovsky, Zubillaga, Sepúlveda, and Hanson 2016). It is no surprise that Venezuela now sits among the top list of corrupt countries, but it is not alone, as many countries globally share the same result. This significant to our research, as the focus of this paper establishes the correlation between corruption and emigration among countries globally, which sets the stage for us to establish a cause for the rapidly increasing migration problems witnessed globally.

Why is this Question Important

Understanding the relationship between corruption and emigration would help shed light on one of the biggest problems observed in governments all around the world by showing a causal relationship in how corruption in certain countries has cut deep into the lives of its people. Understanding these issues could help open the door for potential foreign aid as knowing where to send money, and resources is essential in this process. Overall, by understanding corruption and its effects, we can help improve the lives of many citizens worldwide. Another benefit could also be reducing the need for people to emigrate out of their country every year. Lastly, this could serve as a long-term solution for governments as it will encourage them to ensure that its people are their priority.

Theory/ Argument

The unprecedented levels of corruption seen from Nicolas Maduro and the United Socialist Party of Venezuela are the primary cause of mass migration from this country through Central and South America. For the past decade, Venezuela has consistently ranked at the bottom of the Corruption Perceptions Index. During this time, the Government has misappropriated billions of dollars that should have been allocated for infrastructure, healthcare, and social programs but were instead embezzled into private accounts. Moreover, this deceitful allocation of government spending is used for nepotism and bribery, which has allowed Nicolas Maduro and his party to retain power through the appointment and control of loyalists in the military and the judiciary. The financial instability created by the corruption in government institutions has led to a severe economic collapse resulting in hyperinflation, widespread poverty, and shortages of basic goods and services. Consequently, around 7.7 million Venezuelans have fled the country in search

of better opportunities, making corruption the central cause of one of the largest external displacement crises in the world.

Considering the state of the region since the start of Nicolas Maduro's authoritarian reign, it can be hypothesized, increased levels of corruption, specifically the misappropriation of public funds and the use of bribery and nepotism to retain power, directly lead to higher rates of migration from Venezuela and other Latin American countries. As corruption worsens, economic instability and social hardship will continue to be a push factor for most of Latin America. Shockingly, this trend is also replicated all over the globe, as seen in areas like the middle east through places such as Syria or throughout the entire continent of Africa, regardless of where this story plays out one thing is certain, and that is that corruption plays a large role in the struggle of many peoples lives.

Research Design

The objective of this paper will be to discover the link between Corruption and Immigration trends to prove whether corruption is the driving factor of immigration. The first priority will be collecting data from the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) and cross-referencing that data with data collected on immigration numbers. Immigration numbers will be acquired by using international organizations that track migrants using various means such as asylum requests, residency applications, and undocumented. It could also be beneficial to track political refugee numbers as this would be strong way to establish a connection to the problem of corruption.

Paper Structure

This paper proceeds as follows. In Section 1, we provided an overview of how detrimental corruption has been to Venezuela. In section 2, we will discuss more about what

we define corruption as in this paper and then discuss how this relates to emigration. We will then explain why this is relevant to society in the context of this course as well as why this matters to everyone. In section 3, we will provide our causal theory and hypothesize our argument. In section 4, we will implement our research design, which will describe our methods for obtaining evidence and data. In section 5, we will showcase our findings through analysis, including statistics and trends that reinforce our hypothesis. In section 6, we will explain how our findings and hypothesis work together to support our theory as well as conclude our study on the matter.

2 Literature Review

Corruption Globally

Corruption is often a difficult subject to define as it can be conceptualized in many ways through the various means it is committed, within America for example, corruption does exist in small amounts. (Hellman 2013) However, America does not have an emigration issue, unlike its counterparts within Latin America. The same trend can also be seen within most of Europe, with regions such as Africa, Asia and the Middle East exhibiting high amounts of corruption and high amounts of migrants moving towards more developed countries in Europe. With that we will be defining corruption in this case as the abuse of public office by public officials. This includes things such as embezzlement of government funds, bribery, extortion, cronyism, nepotism, and parochialism (Gardiner 2002). This definition, along with these examples is broad, but it is also essential in conceptualizing corruption as it occurs within developing countries, as these ideas are seen

throughout many parts of the world. Which explains the higher rates of corruption across certain regions compared to others. (Rose 2017). While this all covers the basics of what we will be evaluating, we still would like to elaborate on the overall idea of corruption in the context of the rest of the world as we develop this paper. As mentioned before, corruption is something that is seemingly unavoidable within governments. However, the level of corruption within governments dramatically differs spiking in regions like Latin America, Africa, and Asia, places where citizens and researchers have observed a constant increase in the levels of corruption that appear within these region's countries (Weyland 1998). High levels of corruption exist here for many reasons, and experts consider the main perpetrators to be high office public officials, construction companies, and big oil. (Rotberg 2018). In addition, certain regime types gain traction rapidly, allowing them to set up systems which gives them power over vulnerable communities allowing corruption to seemingly continue. This can be seen in a great many areas, most notably occurring in Syria during the rise of Assad. (Sadowski 1987) These findings are relevant as this paper is focused on the correlation between corruption and emigration across the planet. As discussed, many of these region's countries share similar stories in the context of their governments. However, one large issue that we have yet to really discuss in this section is how this all plays into emigration. As the most common problem associated within corrupt countries seems to be emigration and why numbers have managed to rise or stay constant in some of these areas. (Tienda, Sánchez 2013) Which leads to the overall argument of this paper. Does corruption play a direct role in Emigration?

Emigration Globally

This study examines the relationship between corruption and emigration through case

studies in Latin America and across the world, contributing to a broader understanding of this global phenomenon. Migration, specifically emigration, refers to the movement of individuals from their country of origin to another country, often driven by economic, political, or social conditions. Push factors, such as economic instability, political repression, and social unrest, cause citizens to leave their home countries, while pull factors, such as better economic opportunities and safer environments in destination countries, attract them. When government institutions fail due to rampant corruption, socio-economic conditions worsen, causing some regions to be uninhabitable, forcing individuals to migrate in search of livable conditions. (Betts,2013). Emigration is typically measured by the net migration rate, which indicates the difference between the number of people entering and leaving a country per 1,000 population over a given period. Other measures include refugee and asylum seeker counts, which provide insight into the scale of forced migration, and remittances, which reflect the economic ties of migrants to their home countries. In contemporary Latin America, emigration has become a humanitarian issue, and its significant increase can be attributed to corruption within the governments of migrant's home countries (Lopez,2024). While this trend is especially visible in Latin America, the same patterns of emigration driven by corruption are inherent in other regions such as the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and southeast Asia. Emigration in this study will focus on the large-scale population movements that have been recently observed. Migration is conceptualized at macro and micro ranges as well as different levels of abstraction. The macro level consists of cross-border movements of large populations. At the micro level, it refers to individual or household decisions to migrate based on personal factors like job security or family separation. Moving from higher to lower levels of abstraction can help define

migration by considering the underlying causes and distinguishing between economic migration, where individuals search for improved opportunities, and forced migration, where political repression or conflict pressure citizens to escape their situations. One of the main aspects of this study is the extent to which migration is voluntary or involuntary, which is often influenced by how severely corruption affects daily life and state institutions. In the case of Venezuela, the migration studied is largely forced, driven by the systemic breakdown of governance linked to corruption. The country's collapse, caused by massive government misappropriation of funds and corrupt institutions, has forced millions of Venezuelans to flee, marking it as one of the largest migration crises in the Western Hemisphere. 4

In recent years, emigration within Latin America has surged, reflecting citizens' desire to escape environments of economic hardship, political instability. (Seel et al. 2023). To put this in perspective, the number of migrants living in the region increased from 8.3 million in 2010 to 16.3 million in 2022 (Seel et al. 2023). This trend highlights the correlation between government corruption and its impact on living conditions within these countries. As discussed, we believe corruption has been the driving force behind the rise in emigration from countries like Nicaragua and Venezuela. Leaders like Daniel Ortega and Nicolás Maduro have overseen severe declines in governance that are reflected in their countries' low scores on the Corruption Perceptions Index—17 for Nicaragua and 13 for Venezuela, placing them among the lowest globally. (Transparency Global 2023). This environment of misconduct and repression across corrupt nations has led to a significant increase in citizens fleeing these nations in search of a better future. (Cooray Schneider, 2016).

Political repression of opposition groups and the misallocation of government resources contribute to widespread poverty, increase rates of violence, and reduce social mobility by limiting access to education and healthcare (Prince 2023). As mentioned previously, the effects of corruption from Nicolas Maduro's party have intensified emigration as the government's misappropriation of resources has left the country's economy in a poor state. (Chacón et al. 2021). Maduro's violent campaign of internal political persecution against the Ministry of Petroleum and Petróleos de Venezuela S.A. (PDVSA), led to the largest decline of production in the history of any oil-producing country that has not suffered a depletion of reservoirs, war or internal armed conflict (Ramírez 2021). The persecution of hundreds of those in the oil industry, and embezzlement of profits led to hyperinflation and mass emigration. As a result, Venezuela's inflation rate remains one of the highest globally. In 2024, inflation stands at approximately 360% (FEWS Net). This is a significant factor contributing to widespread poverty, forcing many citizens to leave the country because they can't afford basic goods. Today, 96% of the population lives below the poverty line and 5.4 million Venezuelans have fled the country since 2016. (Ramírez 2021) Similarly, in Nicaragua, President Daniel Ortega's authoritarian rule created another crisis of forced migration. Ortega altered the constitution to allow multiple consecutive terms and repressed opposition voices through arrests, media control, and violence, (Robles 2023). Nicaragua's fraudulent elections and Ortega's role in the arbitrary arrests of opposing candidates in 2010 led to economic sanctions by the European Union and the United States. This, in relation with the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic led to recessions and Nicaraguan citizens seeking asylum elsewhere in the region. Costa Rica, an important country in this conversation, offers legal status to migrants under certain cir-

cumstances. Despite Costa Rica's population of around 5.2 million people, it received the fourth largest number of asylum applicants globally in 2021, with the large majority of those being Nicaraguans (Seel et al. 2023). In Ecuador and Cuba, countries with moderate CPI scores, push factors stemming from corruption is still a one of the largest causes of Emigration. Ecuador has experienced significant emigration due to recurring economic crises, especially since the late 1990s. (Jokisch 2014) Since 2020, COVID-19's economic effects have intensified these push factors, especially as crime rates in the country surged, further impacting public safety and livelihoods. Drug cartels have gained significant power and influence in Ecuador's institutions. There has been a widespread sense that police cannot stop the increase in crime and extortion. The homicide rate more than quadrupled from 5.8 per 100,000 people in 2017 to 25.9 in 2022 (Jokisch 2023). In Cuba, political corruption is closely tied to the country's centralized government, where a lack of transparency has created widespread shortages and economic stagnation. In addition, sanctions from the United States and the COVID-19 pandemic have increased prices and decreased the availability of goods. (Augustin et al. 2022) Ultimately, government mismanagement, particularly in relation to trade restrictions, has hindered economic growth, leading many Cubans to seek better living standards outside the country (Lopez 2021). Most displaced migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean seek asylum within the region, rather than traveling to the United States or Canada, which marks a change within the past decade. (Seel et al. 2023). However, in the case of Cuba's emigration crisis, citizens are primarily traveling to the United States. In 2021, 250,000 Cubans—more than 2% of the country's population, migrated to the United States. Colombia, Argentina, and Peru are notable countries with the most immigrants in the region. Out of the 8 million Venezue-

lan asylum seekers, around 2.9 million were estimated to be in Colombia, 1.5 million in Peru, and 502,000 in Ecuador (UN DESA). Comparatively, in Ecuador's economic crises have resulted in in about 8 percent of Ecuadorians living abroad, primarily in the United States, Spain, and Italy (United Nations). Ecuador also hosts many asylum seekers from Venezuela. While this study was originally focused on Latin America, we noticed similar corruption-emigration patterns are observable in other parts of the world, emphasizing the global relevance of our argument. In Syria, a country with a CPI index score of 11, decades of corruption in state contracts, security services, public procurement, and healthcare under the Assad Regime have eroded institutional legitimacy and contributed to the ongoing humanitarian and refugee crises in the Middle east. (Resimić 2024) Moreover, Poor governance, specifically the lack of free and fair elections, low level of rule of law, high level of corruption and government ineffectiveness led to the Syrian civil war. (Karimi Shafee) Today, more than 6.5 million Syrians are registered as refugees (Chatty 2017; UNHCR 2023). Additionally in Myanmar, a country with a CPI index score of 16, corruption has undermined democratic processes, state institutions, and basic public services. After the military coup in 2021, violent crackdowns forced over 1.6 million people to migrate their homes or cross borders in search of safety (International Crisis Group 2021). The politically powerful in this country exclude populations from resources and make decisions through patronage networks and nepotism, fueling the country's many conflicts (Chung, 2019). These cases illustrate how corrupt practices from Authoritarian governments drive large-scale emigration from violence and political instability. Corruption's detrimental impact has created a crisis that transcends national borders, with emigration becoming both a consequence and an indicator of the corruption affecting countries across the globe. The

push factors stemming from governments across the illustrate a correlation between these two variables, but how can this be measured?

3 Theory

Earlier we defined corruption as the abuse of public office by public officials, which generally includes things such as embezzlement of government funds, bribery, extortion, cronyism, nepotism, parochialism, (Gardiner 2002), and while there is no specific reasoning as to why corruption occurs, we do have a way of measuring it. This can be done by using surveys of corruption perceptions and self-reported incidence of corruption administrative corruption statistics such as international bribery cases or random audits. (Mungiu-Pippidi, Fazekas 2020). It is through this that we can provide a reasonable explanation as to why corruption is bad for a government, as these activities often interfere with civilian life and the overall performance of a government. It is through this that we are going to investigate the effects bad government practices can have on the economy, in order to paint a causal story on why corruption may cause citizens to flee their home countries. Most people acknowledge that the government plays a major role in setting up a countries economy, and it is because of this that corruption is directly tied to a country's economy. As studies have shown that high levels of corruption often coincide with lower levels of economic growth. (D'Agostino, Dunne, and Pieroni 2016). This in turn creates a bad economy, a bad economy leads to reduced access to goods and resources as corruption can also create an elitist class that holds a majority of a country's wealth. Evidence of this can be seen through GDP and supply chains. It is because of this that corruption can have

lasting effects as its vicious nature often creates a broken system which trickles down to the way a government is able to perform economically. This then creates an issue for the citizens living within said corrupt country creating a potential demand for getting out. This is due in large part to the economy, as mentioned before scarcity in essential goods often creates an unlivable environment for citizens living within corrupt governments. When goods are scarce most people tend to want to go where places where items are less scarce. This trend is also true for many things such as, job insecurity, overcrowding, or dangerous conditions. (van Dalen Henkens, 2007). It is because of this that we believe corruption is the root cause of emigration. To put forth simply our hypothesis is that as corruption within a government increases so does emigration within that country. Through writing this paper we have found that corruption often fosters the conditions that lead to a need to escape, and it is because of these issues that people emigrate, which we will go on to study more closely later in this paper.

Hypothesis 1 *Our Hypothesis is that as a countries corruption ranking increases so does its amount of emigration*

Our hypothesis is grounded in the idea that as corruption within a government increases so does emigration within that country. Through writing this paper we have found that corruption often fosters the conditions that lead to a need to escape, and it is because of these issues that people emigrate.

4 Research Design

The objective of this paper will be to discover the link between corruption and emigration trends to prove whether or not corruption is the cause of emigration. In order to accomplish this, we will be using a cross-section time series style design. This is so that we can examine how surges in corruption have influenced emigration numbers within countries across the globe. To do this, we will first be collecting data from the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) using Transparency Global's database to gather our CPI rankings. In addition, we will be using the World Bank's Worldwide Governance database as it holds the specific levels of corruption needed to make an accurate comparison. This is because both organizations are renowned for their ability to track this data. Economic statistics will be needed to pair alongside corruption trends to see if economic trends such as high inflation, reduced access to goods, and lack of skilled labor do coincide with corruption trends. This data will also be tracked using the World Bank as it provides the insights needed to conduct this analysis. Emigration numbers will be acquired by using the World Bank. The World Bank is an extremely important source as they track migrants using various means such as asylum requests, residency applications, to create a much larger data sheet that displays the net migration. Another statistic that will be tracked is political refugee numbers as this will be used to establish a stronger causal connection to the problem of corruption. To produce an accurate analysis of this data we will be using data collected on developed countries as well, as they are integral in establishing this idea of migrant flow, from more corrupt countries to less corrupt countries.

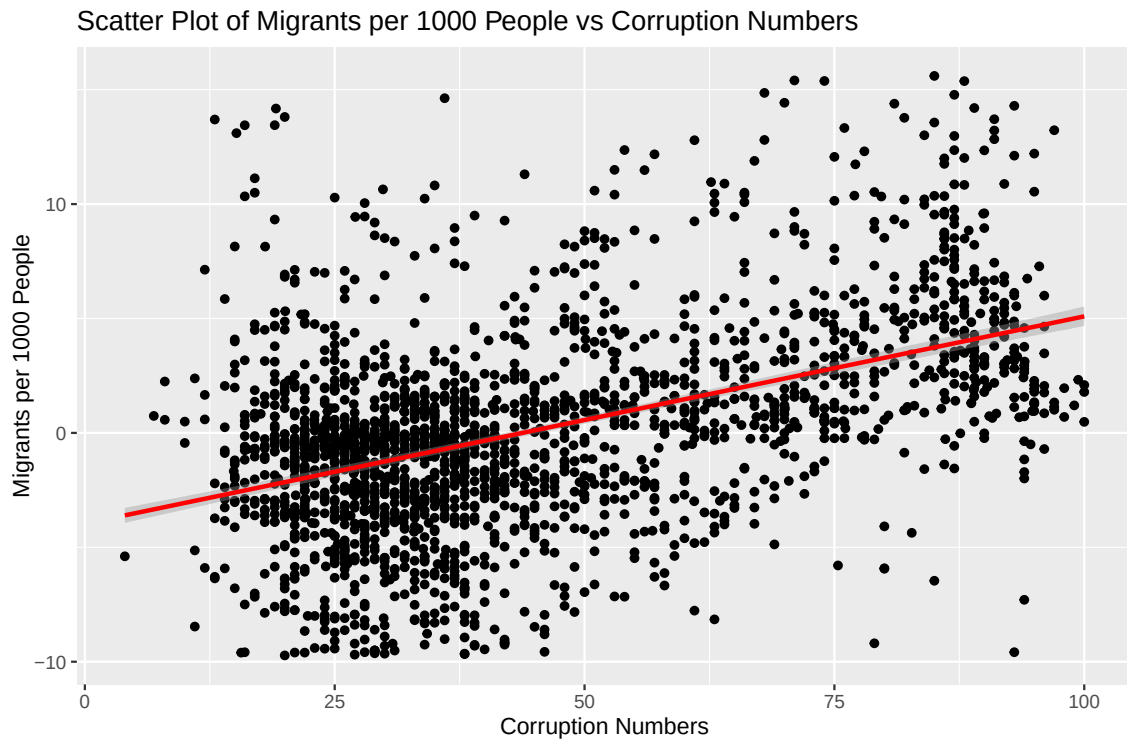


Figure 1. Scatter Plot of Migrants per 1000 People vs Corruption Numbers

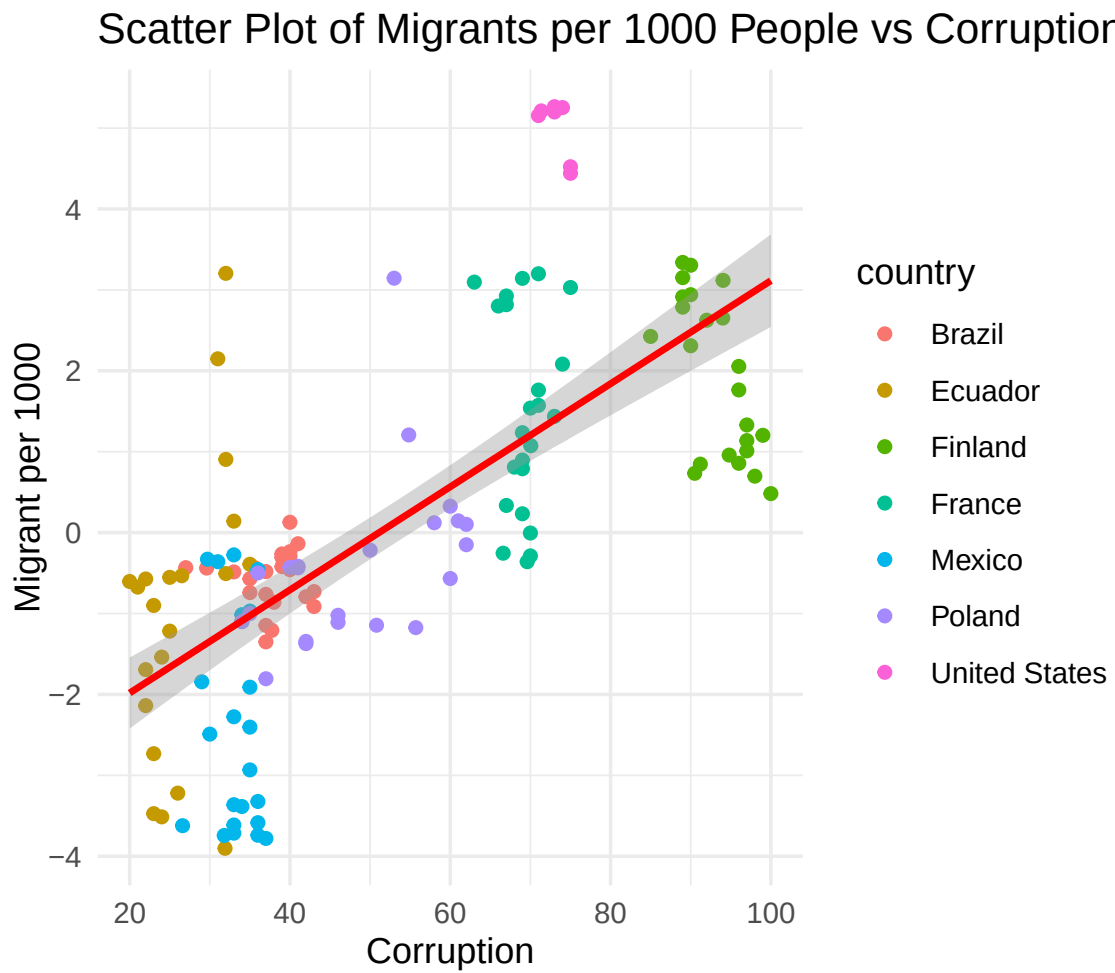


Figure 2. Scatter Plot of Migrants per 1000 People vs Corruption Numbers

5 Analysis

Initially, after analyzing the correlation between CPI ratings and net migration numbers, we found strong support for our hypothesis. However, we felt that having raw migration numbers was not an accurate way of showing our theory, as the movement would be easier to visualize and draw claims from if we based the data on not just the number of migrants entering a country, but also the total population of said countries. Due to this, we decided to remake our model using migrants per 1000 people within the population of a country, and again we saw significant results to support our hypothesis. After this we noticed major outliers in the data in both the lower extremes and the higher extremes, leading us to remove the top 5% and bottom 5% of our data; again we saw the exact same p-value as before ($p = 2e-16$). It is because of this that we can confidently say that migration and corruption are in fact correlated. However, our theory hangs on not just the effect corruption has on migration but also the effect corruption has on migration through a mediator such as inflation. Our primary results for our theory are shown in Table 1. In Table 1 we found strong support for our theory and general hypothesis by finding significant evidence that corruption not only directly affects migration rates ($p = 2e-16$), but also that corruption effects emigration through inflation ($p = 0.046$). We were able to achieve this result using a mediator model. The mediator model allowed us to see if our theory could be directly proven in which we found that to be true. However, the drastic difference in correlation between the 2 has led us to believe that while corruption through inflation is something that can impact migration and emigration, it is not the leading cause for emigration; as corruption directly impacts migration without inflation as a mediator much more. However, our models indicate that it does this in a different way than originally hypothesized. While

we can confidently say that these two variables are intertwined, we cannot confidently say that corruption drives people out of a country; instead, we can confidently say that a lack thereof does encourage migrants to move to a country with lower corruption. This can be visualized in Figure 1 and Figure 2 and shows that migrants tend to end up settling in less corrupt countries, which leads us to believe that this is due to these locations often fostering better living conditions in which they can thrive and succeed.

6 Table 1

Term	Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	P-value	Significance
ACME	-37.8308	-75.8450	-0.6	0.046	*
ADE	2384.3905	2061.1183	2735.4	2e-16	***
Total Effect	2346.5597	2016.7286	2688.2	2e-16	***
Prop. Mediated	-0.0161	-0.0333	0.0	0.046	*

Table I. Causal Mediation Analysis (Bootstrap CI, Percentile Method). Sample size = 2293; Simulations = 1000.

7 Conclusion

This study reveals that corruption is one of the main causes of emigration globally. Through an analysis of many countries we have found that the hindrance of governmental institutions and resources directly contribute to rising emigration rates. Our research supports the hypothesis that as corruption within a government increases, citizens are significantly more likely to migrate in search of countries with stronger political stability and governance structures that protect their basic human rights rather than exploit them. Our

findings suggest that although economic hardship and violence are often viewed as independent push factors, they are results of deeper systemic corruption. On the other hand, our analysis revealed that lower levels of corruption in asylum or destination countries act as a pull factor, attracting migrants to safer and secure countries. As can be seen, corruption not only forces individuals out of their home countries but is taken into consideration when choosing destination countries for refuge. While this study originally focused on Latin America, we discovered that the same corruption patterns seen in Latin America are observable across other regions of the world, including parts of Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Thus, the correlation between governance failures and migrant crises is not concentrated in any specific region but seen in some degree in every region across the world. It is because of these reasons we believe that corruption must be stopped at its roots. Addressing migration crises requires more than just humanitarian aid; it demands strengthening democratic institutions and promoting transparency. Future research should explore comparative case studies globally to further understand the relationship of corruption and emigration and create strategies to stop the root causes of corruption. Ultimately, corruption within governments must be recognized not merely as a domestic governance issue, but as a primary cause of global human displacement.

8 Appendix A: Sources and Definitions

Table II. Description of Variables

Variable	Description	Source
Corruption	Corruption is defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain. Corruption erodes trust, weakens democracy, hampers economic development and further exacerbates inequality, poverty, social division and the environmental crisis. In this paper we sue corruption in the context of government and explain how it effects people	www.transparency.org
Emigration	Emigration, refers to the movement of individuals from their country of origin to another country, this is an important distinction from migration, as migration refer to someone settling into another country whereas emigration refers to when a person moves from a country	Lopez (2024)
Economic Instability	Economic hardship denotes the failure to achieve or maintain a certain economic status or level of living corresponding to personal expectations. However, in a policy-oriented context, economic hardship is more frequently associated with an absolute income level that is inadequate to provide minimum consumption requirements or basic material needs.	Conference Papers (1979)

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