

Violence-driven displacement in Mexico: Why including internally displaced persons in national statistics is necessary to inform a protection-based response

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The Latin America and Caribbean region faces an unprecedented forced displacement crisis, in large part because of the Venezuelan situation.² At the same time, the region is home to a considerable number of people displaced inside their own countries due to armed conflict, generalized violence and human rights violations. While Colombia continues to attract the most attention on this topic³ considering the sheer magnitude and its widely praised legal framework towards internal displaced populations,⁴ emerging scenarios of internal displacement due to organized crime, extortion and widespread insecurity in Central America and Mexico are alarming and warrant closer consideration.⁵

Internal displacement in Central America and Mexico is often characterized as an urban phenomenon linked to criminal activity and violence, yet displacement from rural locations is not uncommon.⁶ Comprehensive, up-to-date, data on the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) is limited, in part, because of the inherent difficulties in collecting regular data on this “hard-to-reach” population who may be hesitant to report their situation. **Figure 1** shows the official estimated IDP population due to violence, as well as the share of the total population, in Honduras, El Salvador and Mexico.⁷ The variation in the years of reporting illustrates the lack of regular data collection for this population, and thus the importance of their inclusion in the official production of national statistics.

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² See [UNHCR Global Focus Venezuela Situation](#) for more information.

³ See [JDC Literature Review Database](#).

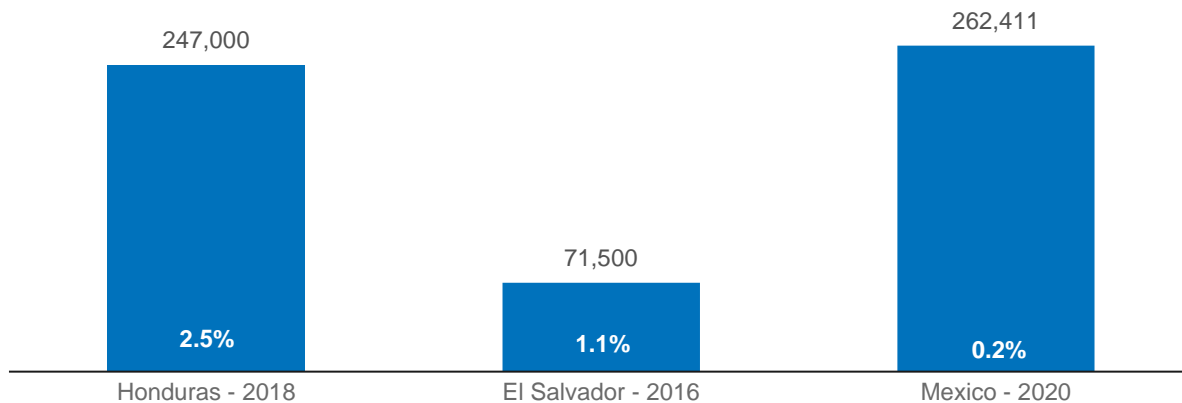
⁴ See Fadnes and Horst (2009). [Responses to Internal Displacement in Colombia: Guided by What Principles?](#)

⁵ See [UNHCR Mid-Year Trends 2023](#) for the most updated figures.

⁶ See [UNDP and UNHCR 2021](#).

⁷ See also [IDMC Country Profiles](#) in each country case, as well as [UNHCR Fact Sheet for El Salvador](#).

Figure 1: Internal displacement due to violence and percentage of total population (per year)



Note: The data sources are: 2018 IDP Profiling in Honduras, 2016 IDP Profiling in El Salvador, 2020 Population and Housing Census. Mexico's figure is considered an underestimate since the 2020 Census is not designed to fully capture internal movement due to violence because it does not consider multiple causes of movement nor intra-municipal displacement, and only movement taking place five years prior to data collection. UNHCR is currently working with key authorities to fully incorporate the IRIS Recommendations in production of official statistics.

Honduras was the first country in the region to acknowledge internal displacement, and established the Interagency Commission for the Protection of Persons Displaced by Violence (Comisión Interinstitucional para la Protección de las Personas Desplazadas Internamente por la Violencia or CIPPDV) in 2013 to give visibility to the issue and work towards solutions. In an effort to document the number of IDPs in the country, CIPPDV conducted a profiling exercise in 2018 which provides the most recent official estimate of 247,000 IDPs. In El Salvador, internal displacement was recognized by the Supreme Court in 2018, and in that year a government-led profiling exercise reported 71,500 persons displaced between 2006 and 2016.⁸ In Mexico, internal displacement is an underdocumented issue despite the growing number of people forced from their homes in recent years. According to the 2020 Census, 262,411 were internally displaced due to violence or insecurity, although it is acknowledged that this is a considerable underestimate as it does not include intra-municipal movements nor movements for multiple reasons.⁹

Considering the extent and growth of internal displacement in Central America and Mexico, it is surprising to see the limited scope of research on the topic.¹⁰ While there are

⁸ See [UNHCR's Microdata Library](#) for data in the case of Honduras and El Salvador.

⁹ CONAPO (2021). [Diagnóstico nacional sobre la situación del desplazamiento forzado interno en México](#). Secretaría de Gobernación / Consejo Nacional de Población.

¹⁰ See [JDC Literature Review Database](#) for relevant studies globally, as well as [Sanchez-Mojica, 2020](#) focused on internal displacement in Latin America.

a number of possible explanations for this, one is the fundamental lack of data on the number of IDPs and their socioeconomic situation over time. As such, the integration of IDPs in official statistics based on censuses and nationally representative surveys, as promoted by the Expert Group on Refugee, IDP and Statelessness Statistics (EGRISS)¹¹, is essential to fully understand the factors driving internal displacement, and the unique vulnerabilities that IDPs face in their day-to-day lives. Only through regularly collected, methodologically sound data can we better measure, and therefore respond, to the needs of IDPs.

In this brief, we take a closer look at internal displacement in the case of Mexico. We aim to shed light on how those forced to flee their communities due to crime perceive safety in their new destinations. A key assumption is that displaced persons face unique consequences of insecurity, such as psychological injury due to trauma, which may impact their integration and thus prosperity in their new homes.

It is worth emphasizing that the analysis is not intended to be comprehensive nor is the goal to estimate an official figure of IDPs which is not feasible with the data source used (see *Data and methods*). For instance, there is a clear limitation in the way IDPs can be defined in the sample resulting in an imprecise measure of internal displacement. This still allows for an assessment of the relationship between the occurrence of having changed ones' residence due to crime with perceptions of safety, but it does not allow for an estimate of the population itself. In addition, we do not incorporate climate-driven displacement into the analytical framework, despite the link between natural disasters, insecurity and poverty more generally.¹² Regardless, the hope is that this brief may provoke deeper reflections about the dynamics of displacement due to violence across Central America and Mexico, and highlight the importance of including IDPs in national data systems.

¹¹ See EGRISS' [International Recommendations on Internally Displaced Persons Statistics \(IRIS\)](#).

¹² See [UN Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement](#) for more on the intersectionality of these various factors contributing to displacement.

Data and methods

Data for this analysis originates from the National Surveys of Victimization and Perception of Public Security (Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública or ENVIPE) of 2021 and 2022, conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography in Mexico (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía or INEGI).¹³ These surveys collect individual-level experiences and perspectives on crime, insecurity, and the socioeconomic and environmental causes of current vulnerabilities. The total number of observations for data collected in the year prior to publication (2020 and 2021) is 92,051 and 92,103, respectively.

This study is based on a regression analysis using ordinary least squares (OLS) of the pooled samples from both years of the ENVIPE. The use of a pooled sample provides greater statistical power due to the greater number of observations. Importantly though, we are not interested in estimating the population cumulatively over multiple years as this would be invalid considering the same person could be counted more than once. The pooled samples from ENVIPE cannot be used to produce population statistics. The unit of analysis is the individual event and the main variable of interest is defined as a respondent having changed their residence due to crime *in the previous year* as captured in ENVIPE questionnaire¹⁴, in relation to those who did not move or perhaps moved for other reasons such as economic ones. Considering that the identification is based on a question that makes explicit reference to a change only in the year prior, and by controlling for the year in the model, we are able to produce valid estimates on the relationship between the outcomes in question and the variable of interest. In all models we control for a range of sociodemographic characteristics: age, sex, location (that is rural, semi-urban and urban), educational attainment, employment status and year.

The outcomes in focus are respondents' perceptions of safety across three distinct geographic areas: their state, municipality and suburb. We complement this with a generated index of an individuals' perceptions of safety. The index is generated using factor analysis, taking into consideration how safe people feel in public spaces including markets, malls, streets, bus stops and public transports, if they had suffered harm and loss due to crime, and if their life routine had been disrupted due to concerns for insecurity. Moreover, we also look at three dimensions of self-reported concerns: 1) crime, which considers concern for drug trade, lack of security, corruption and impunity; 2) economic, which considers concern for poverty, unemployment and inflation; and 3) social and environmental issues, which considers concern for natural disasters, lack of water, education and health.

While the survey provides the opportunity to closely examine the vulnerabilities of people who changed their residence due to crime, there are clear data-related limitations including some

pertaining to the identification issues mentioned prior. We use for our identification a variable that indicates change in residence due to crime in the year prior. However, we are not able to assess directly whether those that did not change their residence due to crime implies no movement or a change in residence for other reasons (e.g., economic). Second, when pooling the samples from the ENVIPE 2021 and 2022, the treatment group (movers due to crime) is a small sub-group of 1,301 people, compared to 182,853 people who did not move. Third, we are not able to assess the nature of the change in residence due to crime, meaning where they moved from and under what conditions. Fourth, the survey does not include retrospective questions on the extent to which households were exposed to crime and insecurity in their previous location, only that they moved to protect themselves from crime. Finally, respondents were not asked about their intentions and preparations to move to other locations due to present vulnerabilities. Overall, more detailed information is crucial to ascertaining the drivers of displacement in order to explain how the decision to move or stay comes about, and to anticipate future internal displacement.

How do people displaced by crime perceive safety and how is security perceived relative to other concerns?

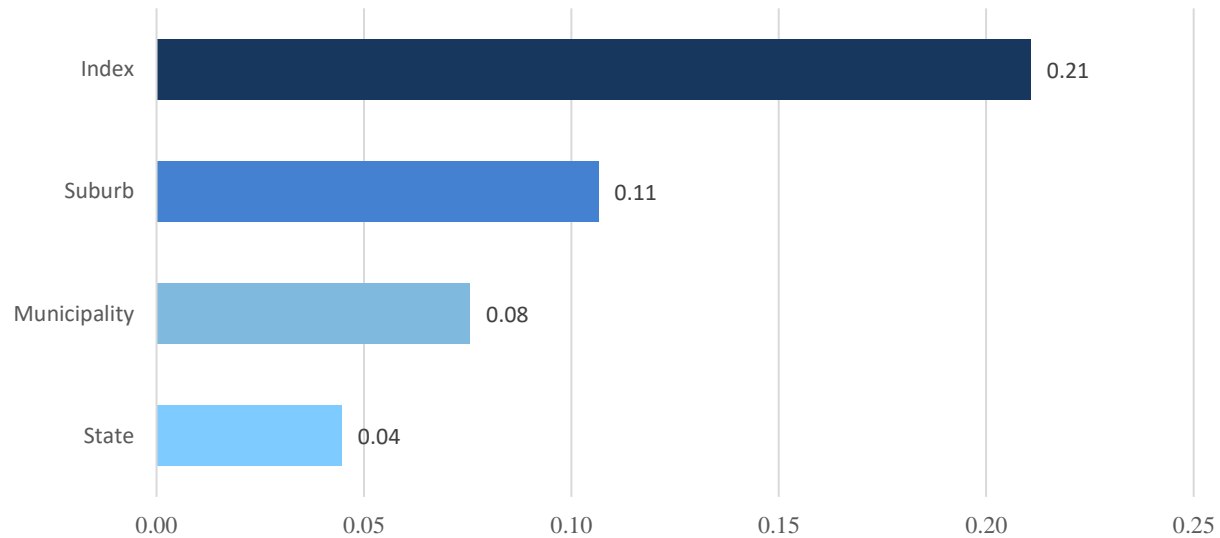
People who changed their residence due to crime have a greater perception of insecurity in their current neighborhoods. [Figure 2](#) shows how respondents who moved for safety reasons perceive insecurity across three distinct geographic areas: their state, municipality and suburb. The comparison group is those who did not change their residence or did so for other reasons, and all results are statistically significant at conventional levels. We find that concerns for safety for those who changed their residence due to crime are highly localized. For example, relative to those who did not move, or those who moved for reasons other than crime, respondents are eleven percentage points more likely to report concerns for safety in ones' suburb, whereas they are eight and four percentage points more likely to report concerns within their municipality and state, respectively.

We also find complementary evidence, based on the generated insecurity index, that takes into consideration how safe people feel in public spaces, if they had suffered harm and loss due to crime, and if their routine had been disrupted due to insecurity concerns. Here, individuals who moved due to crime have a 21 percentage point higher insecurity score compared to those who did not move or moved for other reasons.

¹³ See [ENVIPE 2022](#).

¹⁴ See question 4.11 in the [ENVIPE questionnaire](#).

Figure 2: Perception of safety among respondents who changed their residence due to crime versus those who did not move or moved for non-crime reasons



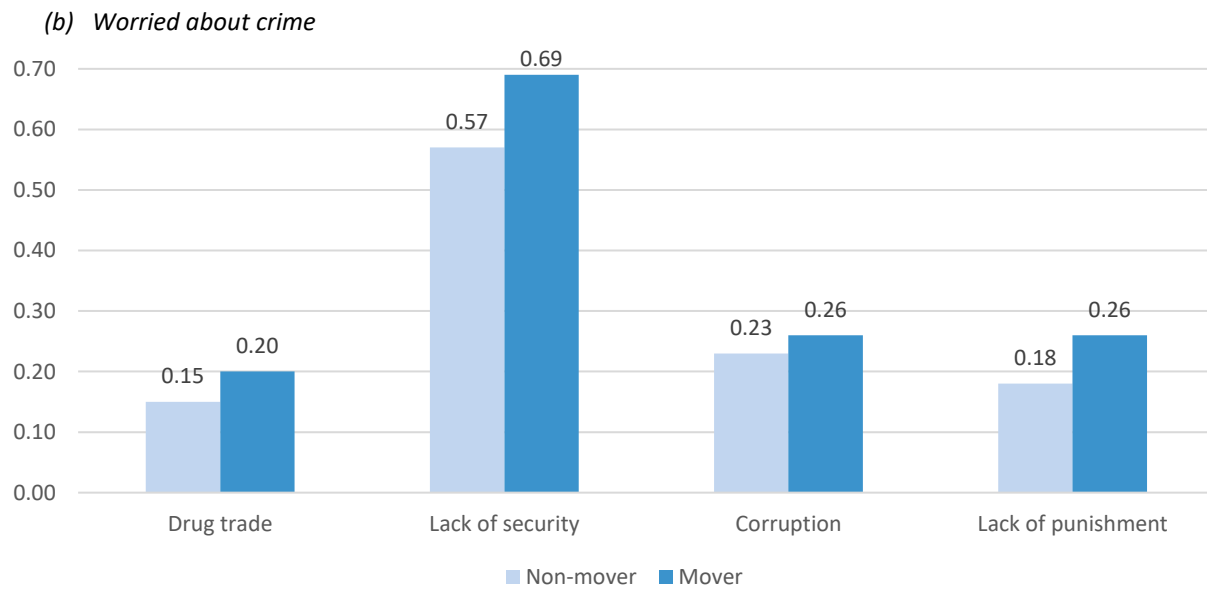
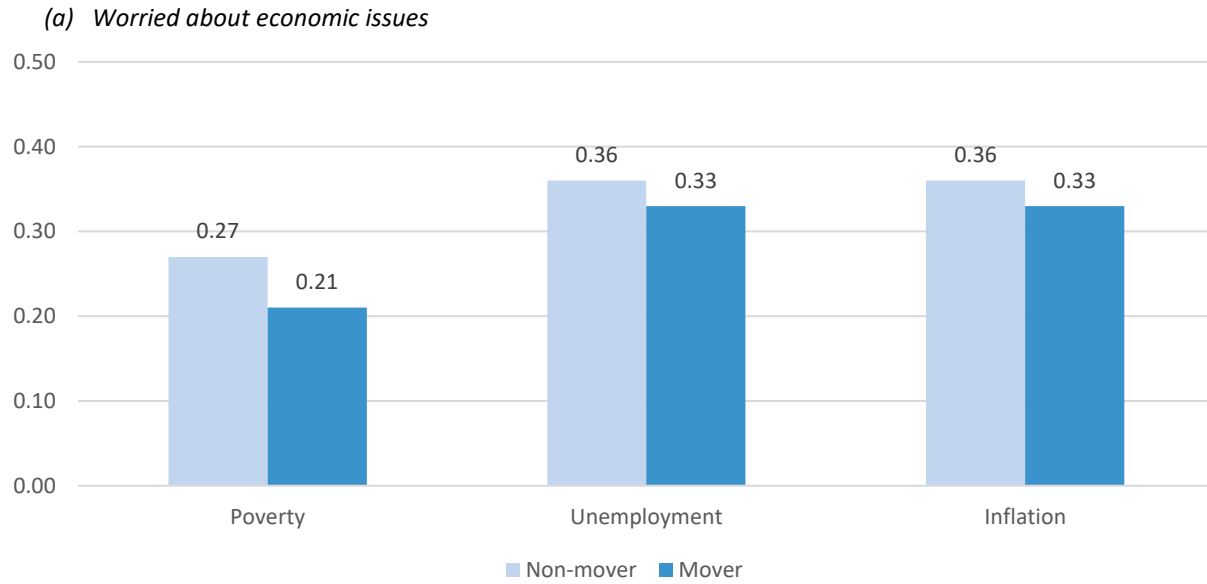
Note: all models control for age, sex, location (urban, semi-urban, and rural), education, employment status and year. The estimated effects report the likelihood of reporting a feeling of unsafety by those who moved residence because of crime with respect to those who did not move or moved for non-crime reasons. All reported coefficients are statistically significant at 1% level. The data source is the pooled ENVIPE 2021 and 2022, with the year included as a control.

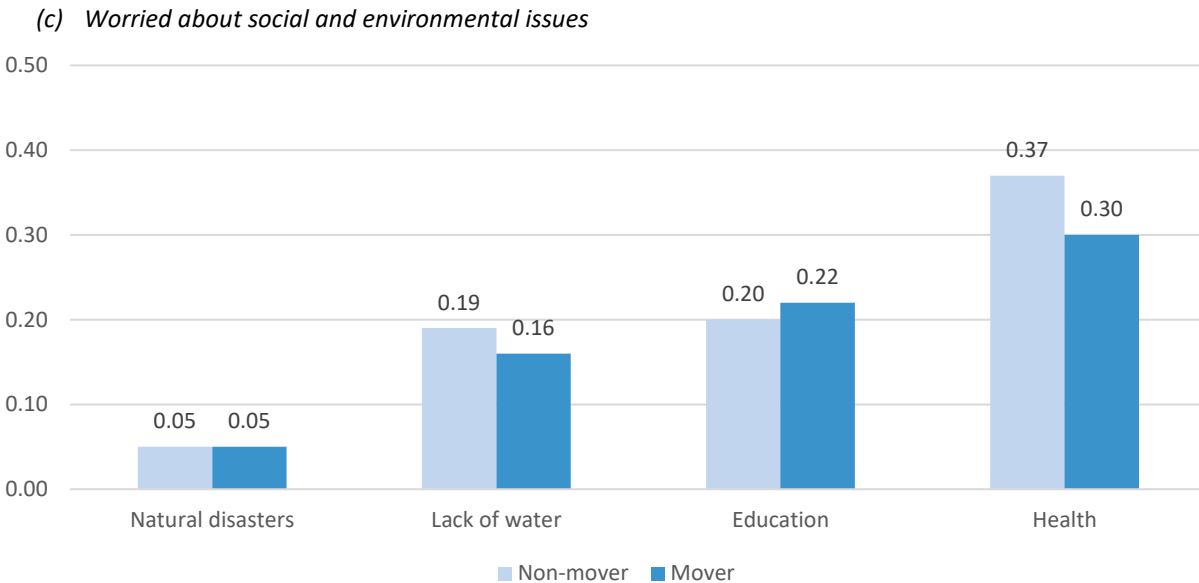
Concern for economic hardship and crime, as well as for social and environmental issues, differs for those displaced by crime.

Figure 3 highlights how people who changed their residence due to crime in the previous year are less likely to report being worried about economic hardship (*panel a*) such as poverty, unemployment or inflation, as well as social and environmental issues (*panel c*) such as natural disasters, lack of water, education and health. Conversely, they are more likely to be worried about crime (*panel b*) such as the drug trade, lack of security, corruption and offenders going unpunished. This is not to say that economic or social and environmental issues are unimportant. However, respondents seem to be more concerned about security, which may reflect their experience with crime leading to their movement.¹⁵

¹⁵ All differences in the mean share between the two groups of respondents are statistically significant, with the only exception for those who declare to be worried about natural disasters (*panel c*).

Figure 3: Respondents worried about economic, crime-related, social and environmental issues, by change in residence status





Note: The graphs report the mean share of respondents who report that they are worried about these issues, by those who moved residence because of crime in the previous year, compared to those who did not move or moved for other reasons. The data source is the pooled ENVIPE 2021 and 2022.

Strategic reflections

The [United Nations Secretary-General’s Action Agenda on Internal Displacement](#) makes it clear that, with the number of IDPs globally doubling over the last 10 years, we currently face an untenable situation. Women, children and marginalized groups often face the greatest impact. In Central America and Mexico, the prevalence of organized crime, extortion and generalized insecurity in some regions is contributing to forced displacement and trapping them in a precarious situation for years, if not decades. If we are to meet the Secretary General Antonio Guterres’ vision to better resolve, prevent and address internal displacement crises, a clear point of departure is to improve how we measure those displaced from their homes including through the integration of IDPs in national data systems.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has been working, with the support of the World Bank – UNHCR Joint Data Center for Forced Displacement (JDC), with national authorities in Central America and Mexico to aid the inclusion of IDPs in official statistics through the implementation of the [International Recommendations on Internally Displaced Persons Statistics](#) (IRIS). In Honduras a JDC-supported project facilitates the inclusion of IDP identification questions and durable solutions indicators in

the national multi-purpose household survey in order for IDP statistics to become a regular feature of Honduras' statistical publications. Similarly, the National Statistical Office in El Salvador took a first step towards including IDP identification questions in the national multi-purpose household survey to allow data disaggregation by displacement status. More generally, UNHCR supports the Central American Integration System's Commission on Central American Statistics (Comisión Centroamericana de Estadística or CENTROESTAD, de la Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana or SICA) with a migration and displacement working group which has a dedicated workplan to strengthen the production of official statistics on internal displacement (either due to conflict or disaster) in Central American countries.

In Mexico, there have been additional efforts such as capacity building and cross-institutional initiatives. In November 2022, with the support of the Ministry of the Interior (Secretaría de Gobernación or SEGOB) and other United Nations agencies and international organizations, UNHCR convened the "Workshop on Internal Displacement, Data Systems, International Standards and Practices, and the Way Forward in Mexico" to promote the international framework and methodologies that produce IDP statistics in accordance with IRIS. As a result of this and ongoing collaboration among INEGI and the National Population Council (Consejo Nacional de Población or CONAPO), in January 2023 UNHCR submitted a formal proposal through the Public Consultation of the Intercensal Survey 2025 to incorporate questions in its questionnaire to identify IDPs; in January 2024, INEGI announced the incorporation of a question on internal displacement that may allow IDP identification. Although there are still some missing components for a more complete identification of this population, this sets a stepstone in EGRIS implementation in Mexico.¹⁶

While measuring IDPs in a consistent and comparable manner is a necessary first step towards a protection-based response, equally important as the next step is the design of interventions that address their unique needs and vulnerabilities. In the above analysis, we find that displaced respondents in Mexico continue to have safety concerns within their local communities, and their worries about crime are noticeable greater in comparison to non-displaced respondents. Considering that being forced from one's home due to violence is often a traumatic experience and, as the psychological impact is likely to be long-term, a dedicated mental health response is necessary. Interventions that include psychosocial support may contribute to local socio-economic integration of IDPs and help them thrive in their new communities.

¹⁶ See [Consulta Pública Encuesta intercensal 2025](#) for more information.

Today there is widespread recognition that internal displacement is not only due to violence, but that climate change and other natural disasters are also risk factors. Moreover, it is increasingly difficult to make a clear distinction between displacement that is due to violence, climate, disasters or other issues as they are often interlinked, leading to a situation where compounding risks makes remaining in ones' home impossible. The response, therefore, needs to be comprehensive bridging the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. As the United Nations' Secretary-General himself states:

"The plight of internally displaced persons is more than a humanitarian issue. It takes an integrated approach - combining development, peacebuilding, human rights, climate action and disaster risk reduction efforts."

[-United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement](#)