

 AFCLC

EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE  
**FIELD GUIDE**

**Honduras**



# About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.

The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 “Culture General” provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on Central America (CENTAM).

Part 2 “Culture Specific” describes unique cultural features of Honduran society. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training.

For further information, visit the Air Force Culture and Language

Center website at <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/> or contact the AFCLC Region Team at [AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil](mailto:AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil).

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# PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

## What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing.

For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value—freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.



## Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature

in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

### Cultural Domains

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to



perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to better

understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains –which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems and others (see chart on next page) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

### Social Behaviors across Cultures

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural

boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more complex market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

### Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Usually, we assume that those in the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

## 12 Domains of Culture



This collective perspective forms our worldview—how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

### Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true — regardless of whether there is evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.



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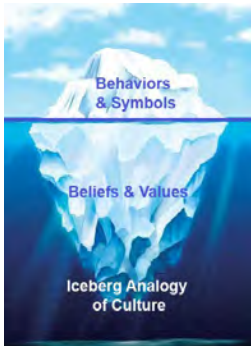
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## Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).



In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts.

The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

As you travel through CENTAM, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.





## CULTURAL DOMAINS

### 1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable, or which occurred prior to written language.

CENTAM occupies a narrow isthmus that connects the continents of North and South America and comprises 7 countries: Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. Archaeological finds suggest nomadic hunter-gatherers inhabited the region as early as 9,000 BC.

Eventually, these groups adopted small-scale agriculture, and beginning around 2,500 BC, erected permanent farming settlements.



Around 1,000 BC, the Maya civilization emerged in southern

Mexico and Guatemala, flourishing over subsequent centuries as it spread across Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, and parts of Nicaragua. At their civilization's height from 250-900 AD, the Maya excelled in mathematics, astronomy, agriculture, and art, constructing magnificent cities featuring massive stone pyramids, temples, and palaces. Although Maya society and culture encompassed nearly the entire CENTAM isthmus by the 10th century, the Maya remained politically fragmented. The Maya world was characterized by independent, adversarial city-states competing for power and resources.

In the early 16th century, Spanish explorers arrived on the Panamanian coast, while others entered the CENTAM isthmus



from Mexico. Seeking wealth and enhanced social status, along with an ambition to spread Catholicism, the Spanish swiftly and violently subdued the Maya and other indigenous communities. By 1540, the Spanish had consolidated rule over most of CENTAM as conflict, disease, and famine decimated the region's indigenous population. Uniting all CENTAM territories except Belize and Panama as the Kingdom of Guatemala, the Spanish ruled the region for the next 300 years. Meanwhile, Panama became part of the Spanish-ruled Viceroyalty of Peru, while most Belizean territory came under British control.

In the late 18th century, mounting unrest over colonial tyranny led to nationalist independence movements. All the CENTAM states but Belize and Panama briefly united as the Federal Republic of Central America in 1821. Politically fractured, the union quickly disintegrated, and within 2 decades, most CENTAM territories had become independent nations. Panama was a part of Colombia until it gained independence with the support of the US in 1903. Meanwhile, Belize remained under

British control well into the 20th century.



Following independence, the CENTAM nations grappled with decades of political upheaval, poor governance, and poverty. By the 1960s, right-wing military dictators ruled over much of the region.

Years of profound economic disparities and government-sponsored abuse flamed insurgencies in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, eventually flaring into brutal civil wars. As part of its anti-communist agenda, the US was highly influential, even actively involved, in many of these conflicts. By contrast, Costa Rica and Belize experienced relative peace. Costa Rica even abolished its military amid other progressive political, social, and environmental reforms.

By the mid-1990s, civil conflict across the region had significantly reduced. Since then, most CENTAM governments have supported mostly stable democratic systems, expanded

economic opportunities, and invested in infrastructure, education, and healthcare. Despite these improvements, the CENTAM nations remain in various stages of development. Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama have seen the greatest stability and economic growth. By contrast, residents of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua continue to face high rates of poverty, unemployment, and violence.

## 2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community. All CENTAM states except Belize are presidential republics led by an elected President and legislature. By contrast, Belize is a constitutional monarchy with a democratic parliamentary government led by an elected Prime Minister and legislature. The United Kingdom's hereditary monarch serves as Belize's head-of-state.

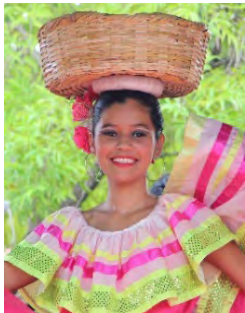


While El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua emerged from years of repressive dictatorial rule and protracted civil war by the 1990s, they and the other CENTAM states continue to face challenges to

the democratic process. Corruption is widespread, contributing to instability and stifling political and economic progress. In some states, corruption engenders public distrust of democratic institutions and public officials and results in frequent and occasionally violent public protests.

Moreover, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (collectively known as the “Northern Triangle”) struggle to curb the illicit drug trafficking industry and high rates of gang violence. In stark contrast to the other states' internal volatility, Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama enjoy minimal violence within stable democracies marked by peaceful and transparent democratic elections.

While some bilateral tensions exist, notably Guatemala's claim to over 1/2 of Belize's territory, most states cooperate in strong regional alliances focused on economic, security, and governance issues. The Northern Triangle nations, for example, work closely to halt the movement of narcotics across borders and diminish the power and influence of organized crime networks. All CENTAM states actively cultivate relations with



the US and rely on substantial US military and financial assistance to address regional security and economic concerns.

CENTAM is ethnically diverse. **Mestizos** (people of mixed European and indigenous ancestry) comprise about 72% of CENTAM's population, some 20% claim European (white) ancestry, and about 8% are Amerindian or members of indigenous communities. The region is also

home to smaller numbers of people of mixed African descent and other minorities. The ethnic makeup of each CENTAM nation varies. For example, a majority of Guatemalans identifies as indigenous, yet few Salvadorans and Costa Ricans do. White and *mestizo* populations hold most of the wealth, political power, and social prestige. By contrast, Amerindians and those of African ancestry generally lack political representation, suffer disproportionately high rates of poverty and disease, and are subject to discrimination and social stigmatization.

### 3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society. The region's early inhabitants followed a variety of indigenous religious traditions, worshipping spirits and deities who inhabited the natural environment. The Maya enjoyed a particularly rich and complex belief system that included ancestor veneration and the worship of over 250 gods.

The Spanish introduced Christianity to CENTAM in the early 16th century, forcefully converting the indigenous population to Catholicism, while suppressing traditional beliefs and practices. As a result, Catholicism spread quickly, and the Catholic Church became entrenched in daily life, fundamentally influencing education, social services, and colonial policy. After independence, Church power fluctuated as various political factions supported or opposed Catholicism's influence in the social and political spheres. Meanwhile, Protestantism grew in popularity in British-controlled Belize. In the 20th century,



Protestant evangelical movements thrived across the region following the arrival of North American missionaries.

In the latter half of the 20th century, ongoing violence prompted clergy to advocate on

behalf of victimized populations and assume influential roles in the resolution of regional conflicts. Across the region today, some religious organizations remain politically involved while others focus on providing important social services. While the Roman Catholic Church still enjoys a privileged status in most countries, all nations but Costa Rica name no official religion and explicitly separate church and state.

The region's population is overwhelmingly Christian: 55% of CENTAM residents identify as Roman Catholic, while 30% are Protestant. Many CENTAM Christians fuse elements of indigenous beliefs with Christian rites and traditions.

Some 9% of regional residents claim no religious affiliation, while some 6% are adherents of traditional beliefs or followers of other faiths, such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Baha'i (a belief system that recognizes the essential worth of all religions and the unity and equality of all people).

#### 4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional

bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).

Family life and relationships are valued greatly within CENTAM. While the traditional family unit consists of a husband, wife, and their children, Central Americans also maintain strong connections with extended family members. Accordingly, extended kin are influential in family matters, typically live nearby, and are important sources of physical, emotional, and financial support. Children often live with their parents until they marry, though some choose to stay longer. In poorer families, children contribute to the family income from an early age by performing tasks like washing cars, shining shoes, or selling food and trinkets. By contrast, children of wealthy families have comparatively fewer responsibilities.



Urbanization has resulted in changes to family life. Urban residents tend to marry later and have fewer children, resulting in more diverse urban family structures. In the Northern Triangle and other areas, widespread poverty and social instability have significantly disrupted traditional family life, forcing some members to migrate within the country or leave CENTAM altogether.

While close kin ties mean family members have some influence over children’s choice of spouses, men and women generally choose their own partners. Both Spanish traditions and Roman Catholic teachings strongly emphasize the value of marriage as an institution and discourage divorce. Nevertheless, divorce rates have risen in some areas.

## 5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture’s categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

CENTAM's traditional Spanish and indigenous cultures privileged men as providers and leaders, while casting women in subordinate roles. **Machismo** (strong masculine behavior and pride) remains an important element of male identity in the region. While today women and men have equal rights before the law, inequalities between the genders remain.



Women often face discrimination in hiring and promotion, and although they face some barriers to their participation in the political sector, the

number of women serving in public office across the region has steadily increased in recent years. Today, women hold a considerable proportion of national and local government positions, and Nicaragua, Panama, and Costa Rica have had female Presidents. Female participation rates in the national legislatures of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua are higher than the US.

Gender-based violence is widespread in some areas. Women are often reluctant to leave abusive partners or report incidences of gender-based violence, considering the abuse to be a private matter. Among reported cases, the prosecution of perpetrators is rare. Abortion laws across the region are highly restrictive and in recent years have caused significant public debate. Although homosexuality is legal in every CENTAM nation, homosexuals suffer discrimination, stigmatization, and violence.

## 6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.

As a result of centuries of Spanish colonialism throughout the region, Spanish is an official language in every CENTAM country except English-speaking Belize. Despite the prominence of Spanish, the region is linguistically diverse: 26

languages are spoken in Guatemala, 10 in Honduras, 15 in Panama, 14 in Costa Rica, 11 in Nicaragua, 9 in Belize, and 5 in El Salvador. Though most of these languages are indigenous to the region, a few are so-called creole languages combine vocabulary and grammar from indigenous or African languages with English or Spanish.

Some of the region's most widely spoken indigenous languages are Mayan, notably K'iche', Q'eqchi', and Kaqchikel. The systematic suppression of indigenous communities during the colonial era contributed to the demise of many of the region's indigenous languages. In some regions, government-sanctioned violence against indigenous residents in the 20th century prompted many native speakers to abandon their heritage, notably also their languages, to avoid persecution. Despite recent revitalization efforts, some of the region's native languages remain nearly extinct. English is taught in schools across CENTAM as a 2nd language and is especially popular among the educated elite and in the business community.

While communication patterns vary among ethnic groups, CENTAM residents generally demonstrate courtesy, respect, honesty, and patience in interpersonal relations.

When conversing, Central Americans tend to be warm, friendly, and eager to extend hospitality, particularly when speaking with family and friends. By contrast, some indigenous groups,



such as the Maya, are more reserved in their communication styles, especially with strangers.

## 7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors,



and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers. Education in early CENTAM societies was primarily an informal transfer of skills, values, and beliefs from parents to their children. Scholars believe the Maya employed a more formal education system in which religious leaders taught medicine, history, math, and science to elite children.

During the colonial era, Roman Catholic religious orders became the primary providers of education. While these institutions eventually established schools and universities throughout the region, educational infrastructure remained limited through the 19th century. Moreover, Catholic orders provided only limited instruction to indigenous inhabitants, largely restricting secular



education in subjects like math, science, and the humanities to a small population of male Spanish elites.

In the early 19th century, CENTAM states began to expand educational offerings to women

and indigenous groups, eventually establishing free and compulsory public-school networks. Today, enrollment rates in primary education are high across CENTAM. Adult literacy rates have risen in recent decades and range from about 83% in Guatemala to 96% in Panama. Challenges to the education systems include uneven access to secondary and post-secondary education, particularly in rural areas, a lack of government funding, and low teacher salaries. In some areas, gang violence and poverty significantly disrupt children's access to education.

## 8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most Western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management,

devoting less effort to relationship-building. By contrast, in most CENTAM societies, establishing and maintaining relationships with others often takes precedence over accomplishing a task. Consequently, business tends to move more slowly in CENTAM than in the US. To build relations with business partners, Central Americans often engage in a **sobremesa**, a period of coffee and conversation at the end of a meeting that may include personal questions about family, relationships, or other light topics.



Concepts of personal space in CENTAM also differ from those in the US. Generally, Central Americans stand closer when conversing than Americans. Moreover, while men shake hands in greeting and parting in a similar style to the US, CENTAM women typically greet both men and women with a kiss on the cheek.

The rhythm of daily life changes during national holidays and local celebrations, when most businesses shorten their operating hours and residents engage in various festivities such as parades, feasts, and religious ceremonies. While the CENTAM states observe a variety of public holidays, popular ones include Christmas, Easter, indigenous celebrations, and independence days.

## 9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Most of CENTAM's forms of artistic expression – including its art, architecture, dance, music, and theater – reflect a rich combination of Spanish, indigenous, and African influences as well as modern global trends.

Salsa, calypso, and Spanish reggae are prominent musical genres across the region, while jazz is especially popular in Panama. Meanwhile, Afro-Caribbean culture influences music and dance along CENTAM's Caribbean coast. In Belize and Honduras, coastal residents enjoy the rhythmic and drum-based

**punta**, a modernized interpretation of the Garifuna ethnic group's songs and dance. By contrast, Panamanians enjoy the **congo**, a dance with African roots whereby performers portray a fight with the devil.

Central Americans are skilled in various traditional handicrafts and folk art such as weaving, woodworking, and ceramics, among many others. Maya artisans are famed for their vibrant,



woven textiles, while members of Panama's Guna ethnic group weave **molas**, intricately cut and sewn panels featuring geometric patterns. In El Salvador, artists mimic indigenous weaving techniques to create baskets, hats, and other

items from palm leaves. Visual arts traditionally reflected indigenous and Christian motifs but today often incorporate brightly colored rural landscapes.

In the 20th century, poetry became the region's most popular and politically influential literary genre. Today, the work of Rubén Darío, Nicaragua's national poet, is celebrated across Latin America. The region also has produced critically acclaimed novelists, who have chronicled the region's tumultuous history while living in exile abroad. Soccer is by far the most popular sport throughout CENTAM. Residents closely follow local, regional, and international teams, and many enjoy playing in amateur settings in their spare time.

## 10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures, and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

While CENTAM cuisine reflects the region's ethnic and geographic diversity, most dishes tend to be simple and prepared from fresh, seasonal ingredients. Corn is CENTAM's primary staple and prepared in a variety of ways but most

commonly as the **tortilla** (round, flat bread of ground corn). Rice and black beans are also featured at most meals. Chicken, beef, and pork are prevalent forms of protein in interior regions, while an assortment of seafood is more readily available to residents living along CENTAM's coasts. In addition to native vegetables, the region's residents also enjoy numerous fresh fruits year-round, often juicing or blending them into refreshing drinks.



The overall health of the region's population has improved significantly in recent decades, evidenced by decreased infant and maternal mortality rates and longer life expectancies. Nevertheless, non-communicable "lifestyle" diseases such as diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular and respiratory diseases are on the rise and today account for most deaths in the region.

Moreover, communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, and hepatitis are prevalent in some rural regions, particularly in areas where residents have limited access to clean water and modern sanitation.

CENTAM nations face several challenges to providing healthcare to their populations. Significant disparities in access to modern healthcare exist between urban and rural areas, where facilities tend to be understaffed, ill-equipped, and limited to basic health services. In some remote rural regions, residents lack access to modern healthcare and instead rely on traditional medicine to treat diseases and ailments.

## 11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, the region's larger and wealthier communities produced luxury items such as ceramics, art, and woven textiles for local consumption and regional trade, while also practicing subsistence agriculture.

After their 16th century arrival, Spanish colonists developed an agricultural economy centered on the production of various cash crops for export to Europe, primarily on large estates with forced indigenous or African slave labor. The region's first cash crops included cacao and indigo, yet by the 19th century, tobacco, sugar cane, cotton, and bananas dominated exports.

Following independence, conflict and political instability largely hampered economic growth. In the early 20th century, several states came under the economic control of large, multinational

corporations that reaped large profits but did little to improve the conditions of the working populations.

By contrast, coffee production in Costa Rica allowed the nation to largely avoid economic downturns, while the



1913 construction of the Panama Canal (a shipping route crossing the CENTAM isthmus) amplified Panama's strategic and economic importance.

Today, several states have diversified their economies across numerous sectors, including manufacturing, food processing, transportation, and agriculture. Belize, Costa Rica, and Guatemala have also developed robust tourism industries.

The economic outlook in CENTAM is varied. While all the states struggle with substantial unemployment and poverty, their economies differ significantly. For example, Panama's GDP per capita is CENTAM's highest and more than 5 times that of CENTAM's lowest, Nicaragua and Honduras. While some 22% of Panamanians live below the national poverty line, rates in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Honduras are 25%, 24%, and 64%, respectively. Nevertheless, wealth is unequally distributed in all the states. Across the region, residents of indigenous or African heritage are much more likely to live in poverty than white or *mestizo* residents.

## 12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. Since the end of the colonial period, CENTAM states have developed their transportation and communication infrastructure at different rates. As a result, the quality of roads and modern technology varies throughout the region.

Roads form the primary transportation infrastructure across CENTAM, though regularly maintained, paved roadways are generally limited to cities and major highways. Unpaved, poor-quality roads coupled with mountainous terrain and aggressive driving habits make road travel dangerous in some areas. Violent crime and social unrest also threaten some travelers.



While modern information technology is available across CENTAM, Internet usage is highest in Panama, Guatemala, and Costa Rica, where more than 1/2 of the population are regular users. Many CENTAM residents access the Internet primarily through mobile phones.

The region has abundant renewable energy resources. In 2022, renewable sources accounted for almost 98% of electricity production in Costa Rica, 75% in Panama, 66% in Guatemala, and 52% in Honduras compared to just 23% in the US.

The US, European Union, and Canada are the region's largest trading partners. Moreover, the US, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica belong to the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), which liberalizes trade among its members.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize CENTAM society at large, we will focus on specific features of society in Honduras.

# PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

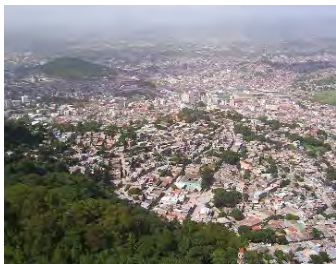
## 1. HISTORY AND MYTH

### Overview

As Central America's (CENTAM's) second-largest and second-poorest country, Honduras was neglected and underpopulated for centuries after the 16th-century arrival of the Spanish. Following its 1838 independence, Honduras experienced political instability, with frequent meddling from outsiders. After several decades of military rule, civilian rule was restored in 1982, yet the military stepped in again in 2009. Today, Honduras continues to suffer political and social instability, while confronting significant governance, security, and economic challenges.

### Early History

Cave paintings in southwestern Honduras indicate humans inhabited the region as early as 12,000 years ago. Between 4,000-1,000 BC, hunter-gatherer communities gradually adopted farming, growing primarily corn, beans, and squash. By about 1,000 BC, sedentary farming communities became common as trade networks developed connecting CENTAM with South America and the Caribbean.



### The Emergence and Spread of the Maya

Around 500 BC, the Maya civilization emerged in Guatemala and southern Mexico. Over subsequent centuries, it spread to El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, and Belize. Maya civilization reached its zenith during the Classic Period (250-900 AD), when urban centers featured large stone pyramids, ball courts, and elaborate temple complexes. Besides adopting advanced irrigation and terracing techniques, the Maya



were expert astronomers, who developed an accurate solar calendar. Also accomplished artists and architects, the Maya used a complex writing system to record dynastic histories, rituals, and astronomical tables. Maya culture spread to encompass a vast region between southern Mexico and modern-day Nicaragua but never developed a unified empire.



Instead, individual city-states remained independent, often competing and warring against each other. Maya influence reached just the western and southern fringes of modern-day Honduras, yet the

country is home to 1 of the most significant Maya archaeological sites, Copán. This site dominated the region as a center of Maya science and art for some 350 years. Beginning in the 9th century, Maya civilization began to decline, likely due to overpopulation, deforestation, drought, and the destabilizing effects of continual war. Eventually, the Maya abandoned many of their great Classic Period cities like Copán, though Maya cities in Guatemala, Belize, and Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula continued to thrive until the 16th-century arrival of the Spanish.

**Other Groups:** Honduras was also home to several non-Maya groups. Inhabitants of the east and central regions tended to exhibit cultural influences from northern South America, while residents of the Caribbean coast often shared traits with cultures from the Amazon. Meanwhile, the Lenca, a group that dominated central and southern Honduras and was also present in eastern El Salvador, exhibited characteristics of both South American and Mesoamerican groups. Generally, pre-conquest Honduras was the site of extensive contact among peoples with significant cultural and linguistic diversity.

### **The Spanish Conquest**

On his fourth voyage to the New World in 1502, Christopher Columbus explored the Bay Islands off Honduras' Caribbean coast, then made landfall near the present-day city of Trujillo, marking the first time European explorers set foot on the

American mainland. While he established no settlement, Columbus named the region “Honduras,” Spanish for “depths,” referring to the deep blue waters he encountered.

Subsequently, Spain sent various expeditions across the Americas largely staffed by unemployed soldiers, impoverished nobles, and young men seeking their fortune, known as **conquistadores**. For 2 decades, these conquerors largely ignored Honduras, concentrating instead on Mexico, Panama, and the Caribbean islands. Nevertheless, the situation changed beginning in 1523, when 3 rival Spanish *conquistadores* began competing over the right to control Honduras, a struggle made more intense by the discovery of gold in the region.

In 1524, the Spanish formed the Kingdom of Guatemala, encompassing modern-day Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and the Mexican state of Chiapas. Over the next 15 years, unrest in Honduras was widespread as infighting among the Spanish continued and indigenous residents sometimes fiercely resisted invasion and enslavement. In the late 1530s, a Lenca chief named Lempira led an uprising against the Spanish, nearly expelling them. Despite the Lenca’s battlefield success, a smallpox epidemic soon decimated the Lenca population. Taking advantage of the Lencas’ weakness, the Spanish invited Lempira for peace talks, then murdered him in 1537. Lempira is still a revered figure in Honduras today.

By this time, Honduras’ indigenous population was decreasing dramatically due to conflict, disease, famine, and their use as slave labor. Of some 800,000 people in Honduras when the Spanish arrived, just 15,000 remained in 1539 and 8,000 in 1541. Meanwhile, *conquistador* Hernán Cortés (who vanquished Mexico’s Aztec Empire) finally consolidated control of Honduras. The region would remain part of the Spanish colony (renamed the Captaincy-General of Guatemala in 1609) until 1821.



## Spanish Colonization

In 1540, the Spanish established a provincial capital at Comayagua, some 50 mi northwest of the present-day capital of Tegucigalpa. The Spanish used indigenous slave labor to work new gold and silver mines, but because this workforce was rapidly dwindling, they imported some African slaves. Yet the gold and silver boom proved brief, peaking by the mid-1580s. Focused on Honduras' interior, the Spanish neglected to occupy much of the Caribbean coast and the Bay Islands. With few large swaths of flat land suitable for plantations, agriculture was slow to develop. Consequently, Honduras remained a sparsely-populated backwater of Spain's colonial empire for decades.

Meanwhile, other European countries, notably Great Britain, sought to challenge Spain's monopoly in CENTAM and the Caribbean by engaging in smuggling, piracy, and all-out war. Because Spain's presence on CENTAM's Caribbean coast was minimal, English pirates concentrated in these areas, attacking Spanish ships and capturing their cargo bound for Europe. In the early 1600s, some of these English "buccaneers" began settling the Honduran Caribbean coast and Bay Islands.



Following an attempt by Spain to dislodge the British from the Bay Islands, the British retaliated by destroying the Spanish fort at Trujillo in 1642. For the next century, Spain largely ignored the growing British presence, allowing Britain to establish a protectorate in the coastal region. Gradually, the ethnic make-up changed with the settlement of British, African, and Caribbean traders, seamen, and escaped slaves (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*). Meanwhile, the indigenous people who lived along the coast, notably the Miskito (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*), had little contact with the Spanish and became significant allies of the British.

## Struggle for Independence

In the early 19th century, unrest spread across the region. **Criollos** (Spanish people born in the New World) resented the political and economic dominance of the **peninsulares** (people born in Spain) and began to question trade and taxation policies. Meanwhile in Europe, the French Emperor removed and replaced the King of Spain in 1808. Many Spanish colonialists in CENTAM refused to recognize the new monarch, with some provinces declaring independence.

**Brief Mexican Control:** In September 1821, the Spanish crown conceded, releasing Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and the Mexican state of Chiapas from Spanish rule and declaring the region's independence. Just weeks before, Mexico had achieved its independence. Seeking to form an empire, it briefly incorporated the CENTAM states before dissolving the arrangement in early 1823.

## Federal Republic of Central America

In mid-1823, Honduras joined El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica to form the Independent United Provinces of Central America, soon renamed the Federal



Republic of Central America with a capital in Guatemala City. A new constitution based on US federal principles abolished slavery and granted limited suffrage. Initially united in

compromise and cooperation, the Republic soon fractured, with petty feuds and regional rivalries dominating politics.

Liberals and Conservatives formed the largest divide. Broadly, Liberals sought a decentralized, secular government and were open to foreign ideas and investment. By contrast, Conservatives advocated a strong centralized government, protectionist economic policies, and alliance with the Catholic Church (see p. 3-4 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Within Honduras, this divide worsened and resulted in a long-standing rivalry between the capital of Comayagua (Conservatives) and the emerging city of Tegucigalpa (Liberals).

The Republic's first presidential election in 1825 was disputed, causing Liberals to rebel. In 1829, Honduran General Francisco Morazán led the Liberals to victory, then assumed the Republic's leadership. As President, he instituted several reforms, notably freedom of the press, speech, and religion, trial by jury, civil marriage, and educational reform.



Nevertheless, conflict between the 2 camps persisted. In 1834, Morazán quashed an indigenous rebellion in El Salvador, yet the rebels' calls for land and labor reform and justice for the poor reverberated across society. In Guatemala, indigenous communities also engaged in numerous uprisings. From the turmoil, Guatemalan Rafael Carrera formed a Conservative coalition, became *de facto* leader of Guatemala and engaged Morazán's Liberal forces in battles beginning in 1837. Meanwhile, the collapsing Republic freed its members to form independent states, which Honduras did in November 1838. Despite these setbacks, Morazán continued to seek control of a united CENTAM. Following his 1840 defeat to Carrera's Conservative forces, Morazán went into exile. In 1842, he attempted a comeback, attacking Costa Rica before his defeat and execution by firing squad.

### **Independence and Instability**

Independence did not bring stability and prosperity. On the contrary, Honduras continued to experience civil strife and political meddling, especially from neighboring Guatemala. For many years, control alternated between Conservatives and Liberals, who also moved the capital between Comayagua and Tegucigalpa with their respective assumption of power.

Between 1855-57, Central Americans temporarily united again to defeat US soldiers of fortune led by William Walker, who invaded Nicaragua and then the Honduran town of Trujillo in an attempt to conquer and colonize CENTAM.

In 1859, a treaty transferred **La Mosquitia** (the easternmost part of Honduras – see p. 2 of *Political and Social Relations*) and the Bay Islands from Britain to Honduras, though the islands initially refused to accept the transfer.



A return to Liberal rule in Guatemala in the early 1870s ushered in a last attempt to unify Central America. In 1872, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica signed

a pact of union, and in 1876, those 4 plus Nicaragua met to discuss reviving the Republic. When diplomacy failed, Guatemala's President Granados unsuccessfully attempted to reunify CENTAM by force.

### **The Liberals Invite Foreign Investment**

While a coffee boom fueled economic growth in several neighboring countries, Honduras remained predominantly rural, poor, and undeveloped. In the early 1870s, Honduras had no newspapers or libraries and very few schools (see p. 2 of *Learning and Knowledge*). The Liberal wave that began in Guatemala soon reached Honduras, and in 1880, the Liberals permanently moved the Honduran capital to Tegucigalpa. They would dominate Honduras well into the 20th century.

The Liberals encouraged foreign investment that initially focused on reviving Honduras' mining industry, with the government granting US companies unregulated and untaxed access to gold, silver, copper, and zinc deposits beginning in the 1880s. Within a few years, emphasis had shifted to agricultural exports. In subsequent decades, foreign fruit companies improved port facilities, built railroads, and constructed workers' settlements. Nevertheless, Honduras itself saw few profits from the lucrative fruit business.

Although 1899 saw a peaceful transition of power, the first in several decades, Honduras remained politically unstable. Meanwhile, bananas accounted for an increasing share of exports, comprising just 11% in 1892 but 80% by 1929. Financial

success made the banana companies exceptionally influential in Honduras, with rival companies allying with competing political parties and inserting themselves directly into the political process.

### The Banana Republic

In 1899, 2 American firms, the United Fruit Company and the predecessor of the Standard Fruit Company, began acquiring banana plantations in Honduras (the 2 are known today as Chiquita and Dole). By 1930, United Fruit was CENTAM's largest employer. On most banana plantations, harsh working and living conditions had devastating effects on workers. The companies often became closely involved in politics, working with governments to suppress labor uprisings and ensure a favorable business climate. The Latin American press especially condemned United Fruit's exploitative labor practices and history of influencing and bribing government officials, labeling it *el Pulpo* ("the octopus") for its long reach into all aspects of politics, economy, and society. The fruit companies' power and influence eventually became greater than that of many CENTAM governments, resulting in the nickname "banana republic."

### The US Begins a Pattern of Intervention

Seeking to protect the business interests of these US companies, the US government took an increasingly interventionist posture towards Honduras in the early 20th century. In 1911, US President Taft sent Marines to Honduras to restore order following an invasion by Nicaragua. The US mediated a dispute between Honduras and Guatemala in 1917, and when banana workers went on strike in 1920, the US sent advisors and warships. When no candidate won a majority in the 1923 presidential election, the US stepped in again, scheduling a new election and facilitating the newly-formed National Party's accession to power. Yet stability remained elusive, and in 1924, US Marines occupied Tegucigalpa for 2 months.



## Dictatorial Rule

Compounding the political instability, the world economic crisis known as the Great Depression of 1929-33 caused significant hardship. In a peaceful and fair election, National Party leader General Tiburcio Carías Andino took office as President in 1932, ushering in 16 years of relatively stable but dictatorial rule. Carías ruled with an iron fist, strengthening the military, outlawing the communist party, and restricting the press. He gained the support of the banana companies by opposing strikes and building some roads. While Carías sought to develop coffee as an export crop, the curtailment of worldwide shipping during World War II caused a backlog of agricultural exports, resulting in widespread unemployment and unrest. Nevertheless, Carías maintained his hold on power, and in 1949, passed the presidency to his Minister of Defense, Juan Manuel Gálvez.

Gálvez continued Carías' focus on road construction and also increased funding of education, restored some press freedoms,



and diversified exports to include coffee and cotton. Gálvez' pro-labor stance led to the introduction of an 8-hour workday, paid holidays, limited employer responsibility for certain work-related injuries, and regulations regarding the employment of women and children.

**The 1954 Strike:** Nevertheless, employers were slow to comply with the new laws, and in mid-1954, a banana workers' strike quickly spread to other sectors such as mining, beverage, and textile industries. Within weeks, some 100,000 strikers had joined the cause, provoking significant uneasiness within the US government, which had recently authorized a covert, CIA-backed invasion of Guatemala when fruit company interests there were threatened. While it did position warships off the Honduran coast, the US ultimately refrained from intervening, and Gálvez settled with the striking workers, giving labor a significant victory and diminishing the power of the fruit companies for the first time.

## The Military Intervenes

In 1956, Honduras experienced its first military coup, which removed Gálvez' National Party successor from power. Yet the military allowed civilian elections in 1957, with Liberal Party leader Ramón Villeda Morales emerged victorious. As President, Villeda Morales implemented several modernization reforms such as a social security system, and Honduras joined the new Central American Common Market (CACM). But because there was little development beyond the coastal areas where the fruit companies were active and Honduras lacked a proper banking system, it benefited little from CACM membership, and the economy failed to grow.



When it appeared that its favored candidate would not win the scheduled election in 1963, the military intervened again. A series of military regimes ruled the country through 1981. The military leaders were largely both ineffective and corrupt, often implicated in bribery scandals involving the fruit companies, murder, and drug trafficking.

## The Soccer War

In the late 1960s, lack of land and rapid population growth compelled some 300,000 Salvadoran peasants to cross illegally into Honduras. Meanwhile, Honduras was experiencing an economic crisis and resented El Salvador's relative prosperity. Viewing the Salvadoran migrants as illegal squatters, Honduras implemented agrarian reform in mid-1969 that included expulsion of the Salvadorans. As tales of mistreatment by Honduran authorities spread, tensions between the 2 countries escalated during a series of World Cup soccer qualifier games in June. Fans scuffled and harassed players, and when Honduras was eliminated, anti-Salvadoran feelings soared. In July, El Salvador launched a military strike against Honduras, which quickly retaliated. Before the Organization of American

States could broker a cease-fire several days later, several thousand people had died. It was 11 years before the 2 countries signed a peace treaty, and because of the conflict, the CACM was suspended for almost 25 years.

### US Intervention in the 1980s

Civilian rule returned in early 1982, when Roberto Suazo Córdova of the Liberal Party assumed the Presidency. Despite political optimism, continued economic underdevelopment combined with an increase in crime with the absence of an independent police and judicial system, contributed to social unease. Meanwhile, other CENTAM countries were experiencing long-term political upheaval, popular unrest, and guerrilla warfare. In 1979, communist Sandinista rebels overthrew the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua. A year later, full-scale civil war broke out in El Salvador, and in the early

1980s, Guatemala entered the height of its decades-long civil war.

By contrast, Honduras never experienced civil war during the turbulent 1980s, though some conditions for



unrest were present. Further, the US prioritized Honduras' stability as essential to stopping the perceived spread of communism throughout the region and significantly increased its economic and military aid to the country. As a noted anticommunist who favored strong relations with the US, President Suazo Córdova welcomed this aid, while allowing the US to use Honduras as a staging ground for its counterinsurgency efforts across the region. For example, the US used Nicaraguan refugee camps in Honduras as a base in its undeclared covert war in support of the Contras against the communist Sandinista government in Nicaragua. In its fight against communist rebels in El Salvador, the US trained Salvadoran military members at Salvadoran refugee camps within Honduras.

Among Hondurans, these activities generated significant opposition. In response, Honduran General Gustavo Álvarez Martínez ordered the detention of activists, while directing death squads to eliminate some opposition and student leaders. Amid large anti-US demonstrations in 1984, young officers loyal to President Suazo Córdova but opposed to the US role in the region's conflicts ousted General Álvarez Martínez. Within months, Honduras banned the US training of the Salvadoran military on its territory. Nevertheless, the Suazo Córdova government continued to cooperate with the anti-Sandinista activities conducted by the US, accepting huge sums in economic and military aid, while allowing the construction of US military bases and other facilities on Honduran territory.

Another Liberal, José Azcona Hoyo, assumed the Presidency in 1986, despite controversy surrounding the vote tally. The same year, investigations revealed that US President Reagan's administration had secretly and illegally sold arms to Iran to support the anti-Sandinista struggle in Nicaragua (an episode known as the Iran-Contra Affair), rekindling anti-US demonstrations in Honduras. In late 1988, President Azcona refused to sign a new military agreement with the US, ending Honduras-based US involvement in the Nicaraguan conflict.

### **Economic Decline**

With the victory of the National Party candidate, the 1989 presidential election marked the first time in 57 years that an opposition candidate took office peacefully. The new administration soon faced increasing crime, charges of corruption, and labor disputes that reduced banana exports, causing per capita income to drop significantly. Economic reforms and austerity measures were largely ineffective, provoking widespread protests as the population grew poorer. Ongoing economic woes helped the Liberals to retake the Presidency in 1993 and 1997. Honduras' economic decline was significantly worsened by the effects of 1998's Hurricane Mitch (see p. 3 of *Political and Social Relations*).



## The 21st Century

As economic hardships increased, so did criminal activity. In response, the government increased penalties for gang-related activities and authorized a surge in government-sponsored violence – independent observers claim that police-backed death squads murdered some 1,000 street children in 2000. The National Party candidate won the 2001 presidential election, promising to curb the violence yet had little success.



There was a growing influence of *maras*, street gangs involved in drug trafficking, during the 2005 presidential election. The Liberal Party's Manuel Zelaya took office in 2006 focused on confronting this threat. Meanwhile, the economy became more reliant on remittances from Hondurans living abroad (see p. 3 of *Economics and Resources*). Eventually, Zelaya's efforts to cultivate relations with the leftist governments of Venezuela and Cuba combined with his efforts to revise the constitution so that he could serve a second term raised significant opposition.

With the support of the Supreme Court, the military ousted Zelaya in mid-2009. The National Congress then voted in an acting President. The international community condemned the coup, and the United Nations passed a resolution recognizing Zelaya as Honduras' rightful President. After initially condemning the coup, the US then reversed its stance. With US support, the presidential election was held as scheduled in November, though some observers condemned certain irregularities, and National Party candidate Porfirio Lobo Sosa emerged victorious. The National Congress subsequently rejected Zelaya's request to return to office. Within weeks of President Lobo's assumption of duties in early 2010, Honduras had restored most diplomatic ties with countries that had severed them following the coup. Although a 2011 governmental commission confirmed that the 2009 events were indeed an illegal coup, President Lobo retained his office.

Meanwhile, the *maras* increasingly undermined domestic stability with widespread criminal activity. Many families even attempted to send their unaccompanied children to the US to escape the danger (see p. 9 of *Political and Social Relations*). A 2011 decree granted the military broad powers to reduce both gang violence and police corruption. Soon, violence spread to other parts of society. In 2012, rural workers conducted land invasions across the country, while journalists and activists faced a wave of intimidation and violence.

**President Hernández Takes Office:** The 2013 presidential election was tightly contested. National Party candidate Juan Orlando Hernández emerged victorious with just some 36% of the vote. Despite significant international aid to combat the violence, Honduras' situation barely improved. In mid-2015, Hondurans took to the streets of Tegucigalpa demanding



President Hernández's resignation following charges he used embezzled funds in his 2013 campaign. Under international pressure, Hernández established the Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (known by

its Spanish acronym MACCIH). This institution was an international commission with a 4-year mandate to collaborate with Honduran institutions to prevent, investigate, and punish corruption.

The 2017 presidential election plunged Honduras into weeks of uncertainty and additional violence committed by government forces (see p. 6 of *Political and Social Relations*). Nevertheless, President Hernández was sworn in for a second term in early 2018, but due to continued charges that the election was fraudulent, he lacked legitimacy among many Hondurans. In early 2022, Iris Castro was sworn in as president. Meanwhile, Honduras continues to be among Latin America's poorest and most unequal countries, with some 53% of the population living in poverty. Its democratic institutions remain fragile with

corruption widespread, and it continues to experience some of the world's highest rates of violent crime, contributing to large-scale emigration, particularly to the US (see p. 9 of *Political and Social Relations*). While the government has taken some steps to address its interrelated economic, political, and social issues, it largely lacks the internal resources necessary to make progress and consequently relies heavily on international aid and assistance.

### Honduran Myths

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity. Some Honduran myths exhibit influences from several cultures and traditions. Others provide examples of good and moral behavior.

The Lenca (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*) tell of a half-human, half-animal creature called a **Sisimite**. A frightful cave-dwelling being with backwards feet, the *Sisimite* abducts a woman who produces a son. After slaying the *Sisimite*, the son attempts to return to his mother's village but is rejected by the community. The son realizes he is the new *Sisimite* and retreats to the cave.

Garifuna (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*) elders traditionally tell **uragas** or stories at wakes and other community events to entertain and teach. Common characters include humans who are overcome with passion or have supernatural powers and clever animals equal to humans. Often humorous and told with exaggerated gestures, *uragas* often reveal a significant African influence, such as the stories of Anasi the Spider, hero of Ghanaian Ashanti legends.



## 2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

### Official Name

Republic of Honduras  
***República de Honduras***

### Political Borders

Nicaragua: 584 mi  
El Salvador: 243 mi  
Guatemala: 152 mi  
Coastline: 511 mi

### Capital

Tegucigalpa

### Demographics

Honduras has a population of about 9.52 million. While the annual population growth rate has slowed since the 1990s, it remains high at 1.3%, primarily due to high birthrates (see p. 3 of *Sex and Gender*) and a large reproductive-age population (over 50% of Hondurans are under age 24) despite high rates of emigration. About 60% of the population lives in metropolitan areas, mostly in and around Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. In contrast to other Central American (CENTAM) nations with heavily populated coastal and lowland regions, Honduras' population concentrates primarily in western mountainous and central highland areas. Meanwhile, stretches of the northeastern Caribbean coast remain virtually uninhabited.

### Flag

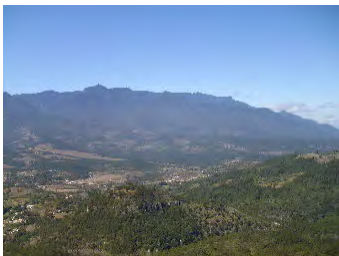
The Honduran flag consists of 3 equal horizontal bands of cerulean blue (top and bottom) and white (middle). The blue bands symbolize the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea, while the white represents the land between the 2 bodies of water as well as peace and prosperity. Five, 5-pointed stars arranged in the shape of an "X" are centered in the middle of the flag, representing the members of the former Federal Republic of Central America: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua.



## Geography

Honduras borders the Gulf of Honduras in the Caribbean Sea to the North, Nicaragua to the Southeast, the Gulf of Fonseca in the Pacific Ocean to the South, El Salvador to the Southwest, and Guatemala to the Northwest. Honduras' total land area, including the Bay Islands off the northern coast, is about 43,200 sq mi, making it CENTAM's second largest country behind Nicaragua and slightly larger than Tennessee.

Vast, rugged mountains dominate over 3/4 of Honduras' interior. Highland basins and flat-floored, heavily-populated valleys intersperse the mountain ranges and feature dry, deciduous woodlands and grasslands. The nation's highest peak, Mount Las Minas, reaches 9,416 ft. in the far West. A narrow strip of lowlands characterized by dense tropical forests and fertile plains stretches along the long and meandering Caribbean coastline in the North. The easternmost edge of this coastline is an area known as the Mosquito Coast (*La Mosquitia*), a sparsely populated region of freshwater lagoons, swamps, mangrove forests, and low-lying sandy plains. The short Pacific coast features savannas and lowlands with fertile volcanic and alluvium soils. Forests cover about 45% of the country, while agricultural land, both arable land and permanent crops and pastures, extends across an additional 29%.



## Climate

Honduras' climate varies by elevation. Along its coasts and in lowland regions, the country experiences a hot and humid tropical climate that divides into rainy (May-October) and dry seasons (March-June in the North and December-April in the South). Meanwhile, mountainous and upland regions experience a more temperate climate. Accordingly, temperatures range from 79°F-82°F annually along the coasts, while highlands average 66°F-73°F year-round. Temperatures are cooler at higher elevations, averaging 59°F and lower. Generally, rainfall is heaviest along the northern Caribbean coast.

## Natural Hazards

Honduras is vulnerable primarily to flooding, tropical storms, earthquakes, and landslides. Heavy seasonal rains regularly trigger deadly and damaging floods. Mountainous regions are also prone to landslides during the rainy season, while droughts and forest fires are common across the country in drier months. Honduras' long, northern coast is particularly vulnerable to hurricanes and tropical storms. Honduras suffered its most devastating storm in 1998, when Hurricane Mitch stalled over the region, dumping torrential rain and washing away crops, roads, and structures. The storm and its aftereffects killed around 7,000 and displaced some 1.5 million while destroying 70% of transportation infrastructure and causing over \$2 billion in economic losses.



## Environmental Issues

Urban expansion, illegal logging, harmful “slash and burn” agriculture, and the harvesting of wood for cooking result in widespread deforestation. Primarily afflicting interior regions, deforestation has led to serious soil erosion, which in turn impedes the natural retention of water and worsens flooding and landslides.

Large-scale improper disposal of toxic industrial and agricultural waste contributes to widespread soil and water pollution. For example, pesticides used by banana producers have endangered marine ecosystems along the Caribbean coast. Further inland, unregulated mining activities introduce dangerous amounts of heavy metals into rivers, streams, and other sources of fresh water. Meanwhile, raw sewage and household waste pollute urban areas. Lastly, air pollution caused by automobile emissions is a significant concern in Tegucigalpa and other large cities. Environmental activists combatting controversial land development projects, illegal logging, and other activities are often victims of intimidation, harassment, and even murder (see “The Assassination of Berta Cáceres” below).

## Government

Honduras is a presidential republic with a parliamentary government. The country divides into 18 departments (**departamentos**) administered by elected governors and local councils. Departments further subdivide into municipalities governed by elected councils. Honduras' latest constitution was adopted in 1982 and divides power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, while also outlining the basic rights and freedoms of Honduran citizens.

## Executive Branch

Executive power is vested in the President, who is both chief-of-state and head-of-government. A council of ministers and Vice President (VP) support the President. Both the President and VP are elected by popular vote to serve 4-year terms. The current and first female President of Honduras, Xiomara Castro de Zelaya, took office in January 2022.



## Legislative Branch

Honduras' legislature is a 1-chamber **Congreso Nacional** (National Congress or NC), composed of 128 members directly elected in multi-seat constituencies by a proportional representation vote to serve 4-year terms. The NC controls most legislative powers

such as amending the constitution, appointing government officials, and approving declarations of war.

## Judicial Branch

The judiciary includes a Supreme Court of Justice, numerous Appellate Courts, Courts of First Instance, and Peace Courts. As the highest court, the Supreme Court is the final court of appeal for both civil and criminal cases. The Supreme Court consists of 15 justices organized into constitutional, civil, criminal, and labor chambers. The NC elects all justices from a pool of candidates selected by an independent body of judiciary members, government officials, and members of civil society. Judges serve renewable 7-year terms.

Decades of political instability and corruption have left judicial power weak and fragmented, with members vulnerable to intimidation and harassment by powerful politicians, business elite, and criminal groups. With the Organization of American States (OAS), Honduras established the Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (known by its Spanish acronym MACCIH) in mid-2016 (see p. 14 of *History and Myth*). Intended to strengthen Honduras' judiciary and democratic institutions, MACCIH prosecutes high-profile corruption cases and examines links between criminal organizations and the political elite. It also works with civil society to dismantle public and private networks that promote corruption and impunity.

### Political Climate

Since transitioning to a multiparty democracy in 1982, Honduras has experienced 10 consecutive democratic elections. Nevertheless, some transfers of power have been marred by scandal, corruption, violence, and interference by the military (see p.11-14 of *History and Myth*). Meanwhile, poverty, rising inequality, and pervasive gang violence further hindered social and political progress and democratic stability. Even so, successive governments have sought to strengthen Honduras' democratic institutions, rule of law, and the economy, while combatting organized crime and the country's endemic poverty.



While numerous political groups are active, 2 large and historically influential parties contend for power: the Liberal Party (**Partido Liberal**, or PL) and the more conservative National Party (**Partido Nacional**, or PN). Since 1982, Honduras has had 6 Presidents representing PL, while 4, including former President Hernández, have been members of PN.

Former President Hernández's tenure was tumultuous. In 2015, he became embroiled in a corruption scandal related to his 2013 campaign (see p. 14 of *History and Myth*). That same year, allies

of his administration successfully persuaded the Supreme Court to abolish a law prohibiting Presidents from seeking reelection, allowing Hernández to participate in the 2017 race.

Hernández's main challenger that year was Salvador Nasralla of the opposition Alliance coalition comprising several smaller leftist parties. Initial results favored Nasralla before announcements concerning the official tally ceased for more than a day. When communications resumed, the electoral commission proclaimed Hernández's victory. Protests formed immediately, and some 20 people died in subsequent demonstrations. Yielding to pressure, the electoral commission held a recount in a few precincts, then announced official results giving Hernández the victory. While some international observers found no voting irregularities, others condemned the results and called for new elections. Nevertheless, Hernández



was sworn in for a second term in early 2018.

Although Hernández promised to tackle corruption, his administration made little progress in curtailing its existence at all levels of government, even up

to the Supreme Court. Many members of his government openly rejected MACCIH's anti-corruption efforts and actively worked to undermine the organization. Still, MACCIH helped indict some 38 prominent government officials in mid-2018 for fraud and embezzlement, among other charges, revealing the use of illegal funds by several political parties.

**The Assassination of Berta Cáceres:** In March 2016, Honduras was rocked by the murder of internationally-respected indigenous leader and environmental activist Berta Cáceres. Along with other local leaders, Cáceres had worked for over a decade to combat illegal logging and other threats to indigenous communities. Some experts believe her murder was precipitated by her efforts to stop construction of a hydroelectric project.

Investigations in 2018 revealed the participation of several former Honduran military and police members in the crime.

## Defense

The Honduran Armed Forces (HAF) consist of ground, maritime, air, and Military Police branches with a joint strength of 14,950 active duty troops and 60,000 reserve personnel. The HAF is charged primarily with defending Honduran territory against foreign and domestic threats, supporting disaster relief efforts, and participating in multinational security initiatives. Domestic counter-gang and counter-narcotics efforts have dominated HAF operations in recent decades.

**Army:** A well-trained force of 7,300 active-duty troops divided into a Special Forces group, 21 maneuver brigades, battalions, and companies (including mechanized, light, and presidential), 2 combat support battalions, and an air defense battalion.

**Air Force:** Consists of 2,300 active-duty personnel divided into 2 fighter/ground attack squadrons, a ground attack/intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance/training unit, 2 transport squadrons and fleets, and a transport helicopter squadron. The



Air Force is equipped with 17 combat capable aircraft and 14 helicopters.

**Navy:** Consists of 1,350 active-duty personnel equipped with 15 patrol and coastal combatants and 4 amphibious

vessels and landing craft. The Navy also includes a Marine division comprised of 1,000 active-duty members).

**Military Police:** Consists of 4,000 Military Police members divided into 8 maneuver battalions.

**Paramilitary:** Consists of 8,000 Public Security Force members with 11 regional commands.

# Honduran Air Force Rank Insignia



Major  
General



Brigadier  
General



Colonel



Lieutenant  
Colonel



Major



Captain



Lieutenant  
First  
Class



Lieutenant  
Second  
Class



Sergeant  
Major



Master  
Sergeant



Technician  
Sergeant



Sergeant



## Security Issues

Threats related to organized crime and regional illicit drug trafficking dominate Honduras' security environment.

**Internal Violence:** Decades of political instability, widespread poverty, and a lack of education and employment opportunities facilitated the rise of organized crime. Many young unemployed and marginalized Hondurans became vulnerable to recruitment both by urban street gangs and large, transnational organized criminal organizations (*maras*). The 2 largest *maras* in Honduras are *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang (M-18 or Barrio 18). Both groups initially formed in the US: MS-13 by Salvadorans, who fled the civil war and M-18 by Mexicans living in California. Following large-scale expulsions of undocumented criminal immigrants from the US, both *maras* grew in popularity in CENTAM during the mid-1990s. Today, they comprise the region's largest and most powerful gangs with an estimated 85,000 members combined across CENTAM.

Criminal groups exert substantial influence in Honduran society and, in some regions, act with relative impunity.



In addition to waging violent territorial wars with rivals and clashing with security forces, *maras* engage in numerous other destabilizing activities, such as human trafficking, extortion, and harassment of public officials. Although the homicide rate has fallen from 87 deaths per 100,000 people in 2011 to 31 in 2023, Honduras remains among the world's most violent nations. Gang-related violence, poverty, and a general sense of insecurity have prompted thousands of Hondurans to seek asylum in Mexico, the US, and elsewhere in CENTAM, creating a migration crisis and straining relations with receiving nations (see "Relations with the US" below). Meanwhile, political instability, corruption, and weak state capacity have severely impeded the government's ability to limit the influence of gangs.

**Contraband Trafficking:** Over the last decade, international efforts to curb the drug trade in Colombia, Mexico, and the Caribbean pushed trafficking routes into CENTAM. Consequently, nearly 80% of all illegal drugs flowing into the US pass through CENTAM. While the government has attempted to limit the cross-border movement of narcotics, Honduras remains a major transit point for cocaine, heroin, and other drugs. International drug-trafficking organizations often partner with *maras* and street gangs to distribute and transport narcotics, further worsening internal violence.

### Foreign Relations

Honduras is active in regional and global institutions such as the Organization of American States, Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, Central American Integration System, United Nations, International Monetary Fund, Inter-American Development Bank (IADP), World Trade Organization, and World Bank.

**Regional Cooperation:** Collectively known as “The Northern Triangle,” Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador seek to foster military, economic, and political cooperation. In 2014, the coalition partnered with the IADP to create the Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity (A4P), a 5-year \$22 billion security and development initiative to improve public safety, stimulate the economy, and strengthen civil society and public institutions. From 2016-17, the 3 nations collectively contributed over \$5 billion to the A4P and continue to closely cooperate on security matters, such as a tri-



national task force to limit the cross-border movement of organized criminal groups and narcotics. Honduras also cooperates militarily with Nicaragua to limit illicit activities along their long and porous border.

**Relations with the US:** As Honduras' largest bilateral donor, the US provided over \$3 billion in economic and social assistance to Honduras since the 1960s. Through various initiatives, the US supported the development of Honduran political institutions, civil society, the judiciary, and other stabilizing forces to help strengthen democracy and rule of law. Other assistance programs targeted food security and economic growth, the sustainable management of natural resources, access to education and health services, and business and investment. The US also sought to diminish security risks throughout the CENTAM region, contributing over \$1 billion for regional security assistance from 1998-2015 under the Central America Regional Security Initiative.



Frustrated by the ongoing arrival of CENTAM migrants and asylum-seekers

at the US border, then-US President Trump suspended all aid to the Northern Triangle in 2019 and announced future aid would be withheld until the US government was assured that Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador were taking sufficient steps to reduce migration. The US resumed aid to Honduras in late 2019.

Along with other CENTAM nations, the US and Honduras participate in a free trade agreement which allows goods, services, and capital to move freely among the member nations (see p. 2 of *Economics and Resources*). An estimated 1 million Hondurans currently reside in the US. Remittances from these US residents comprise a large portion of Honduras' GDP (see p. 3 of *Economics and Resources*). Some Hondurans have negative feelings towards the US ranging from skepticism to open hostility. These feelings stem from a variety of issues, notably the long history of US intervention in the country (see p. 8 and 11-12 of *History and Myth*) and the former US administration's lack of sympathy for Honduran asylum-seekers and its 2019 suspension of aid.

## Ethnic Groups

Honduras' population divides primarily into 4 groups: **ladinos** or **mestizos** (people who have a mixed European and indigenous ancestry); **indígenas** (Amerindian or indigenous peoples); Afro-Hondurans/Afro-indigenous peoples; and others (Hondurans of Spanish or other European, Arab, or Asian descent). As the largest group, **mestizos** comprise some 90% of the population.

Nearly 7% of the population self-identifies with an indigenous or other minority group. Based on their own studies, indigenous



organizations claim that proportion is closer to 20%. The 2 largest groups are the Lenca, a group that dominated central and southern Honduras before the 16th-century arrival of the Spanish (see p. 2-3 of *History and Myth*), and the Garifuna, the descendants of marooned Africans and Carib peoples (the indigenous inhabitants of the Caribbean Lesser Antilles islands) who were exiled to the Bay Islands by the British in the 18th century. The Garifuna are still predominant on Honduras' northern coast and Caribbean islands.

The third largest group is the Miskito, an Amerindian group concentrated along the Caribbean coast in Honduras and Nicaragua. Beginning in the mid-17th century, the Miskito became allies of the British (see p. 4 of *History and Myth*) and began intermarrying with escaped African slaves, both of which heavily influenced their culture. Other indigenous groups include the Tolupán (or Jicaque), Nahua, Ch'ortí (a Maya group – see p. 1-2 of *History and Myth*), Pech, and Tawahka. Afro-Hondurans, also known as Creoles, are people of mixed Afro-Caribbean and British descent. They live primarily on the Bay Islands and commonly speak English or Creole (see p. 2 of *Language and Communication*). They make up around 2% of the population. Some 1% of the population are Arab, Chinese, or white, notably including English-speaking Bay Islanders descended from British settlers.

## Social Relations

Due to its lack of economic development and underpopulation since the 16th-century arrival of the Spanish (see p. 2-4 of *History and Myth*), Honduras never developed an oligarchy or political and economic elite. Consequently, unlike elsewhere in CENTAM, the large peasant and working class was largely able to escape severe repression. Honduran society was also less stratified, since it lacked the rigid race and class structure common in most other former Spanish colonies. Nonetheless, the 20th century saw the wealth gap between the large working class and small upper class increase. Furthermore, decades of societal instability, political corruption, economic insecurity, and



the violent activities of gangs combined with extreme poverty have weakened the bonds of Honduran society.

Unlike other CENTAM countries,

Honduras' constitution provides little recognition of the rights of its indigenous populations. Since the 1990s, many of these groups have sought support for their unique cultures and languages (see p. 1-2 of *Language and Communication*), along with recognition of their rights to certain territories and resources. These efforts have often met resistance and even violence from outsiders seeking to control and profit from those territories and resources.

Indigenous Hondurans disproportionately comprise the very poor and often lack access to basic social services such as education and healthcare. Nevertheless, indigenous organizations have made some gains. In 2013, the Honduran government granted title to almost 7% of its territory to the region's indigenous Miskito residents in order to protect the unique tropical rain forest along the Caribbean coast from development and misuse. Further, a 2018 law requires the consultation of indigenous peoples before governmental authorization of a project in their territory, though the law also grants the government the right to ignore the outcome of any such consultation.

## 3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

### Overview

Honduras' population is predominantly Christian. Although estimates vary, as of 2023 approximately 55% of Hondurans are Protestant and 33% Roman Catholic. About 11% claim no religious affiliation, while the remaining 1% self-identify as "other." Some Hondurans adhere to traditional religious beliefs and incorporate them into Christian practices.

Honduras' constitution guarantees freedom of religion and allows Hondurans to practice and express all faiths freely, provided those practices do not impede public order or infringe on other laws. The constitution also prohibits religious discrimination, mandates the separation of church and state, and forbids religious leaders from holding public office or making political statements. While the constitution names no official religion, it formally recognizes the Roman Catholic Church, thereby granting it a privileged legal status. For example, the Catholic Church is exempted from the registration process which all other religious groups must complete before building places of worship, receiving tax exemptions, and establishing schools, among other benefits.



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### Early Religious Landscape

Honduras' early inhabitants (the Maya, Lenca, and other groups – see p. 1-2 of *History and Myth*) led a rich spiritual life. Scholars believe indigenous groups recognized different spirits and gods who constructed the universe, created the earth and humans, and influenced daily life. For example, the Maya worshipped numerous nature gods, including those controlling the sun, moon, rain, and animals, and practiced numerous intricate rituals based on an elaborate 260-day sacred calendar. Believing in the cyclical nature of creation and destruction, the

Maya meticulously timed religious rituals and ceremonies according to their complex calendrical system. An order of priests conducted religious rites, which included bloodletting, sacrifices, and other rituals. Moreover, followers consulted priests and other spiritual leaders to communicate with divine entities, who in turn could guide or obstruct human behavior.



While the geographic reach of Maya civilization was limited in Honduras, the region was home to several Maya cultural and religious sites. For example, the artistry revealed in Copán,

an ancient Maya city in western Honduras, suggests the settlement was likely a prominent ceremonial center.

### **The Introduction of Christianity**

Spanish conquerors seeking wealth and new territories for the Spanish Crown brought Christianity to the region in the early 16th century (see p. 2-3 of *History and Myth*), notably holding the New World's first Catholic mass in Honduras' Bay Islands in 1502. Reflecting the religious zeal in Spain at the time, the conquerors viewed traditional indigenous beliefs and practices as manifestations of the devil. Consequently, the Spanish forcibly and systematically converted the indigenous population to Catholicism. While violently quelling rebellions, the Spanish also destroyed indigenous temples, shrines, and other sacred sites, burned libraries containing historical and religious texts, and prohibited rituals, dances, and other traditional practices.

Within several decades, Spain's aggressive conversion and abuse of the region's inhabitants had devastated indigenous culture and religion. Appalled at the brutal and repressive policies of the newly governing elite, many Catholic missionaries advocated for the better treatment of indigenous populations. Despite the Catholic activists' efforts to curb abuses, colonial authorities continued their harsh treatment of local populations, eventually subjugating and converting most of the region's residents to Catholicism.

## Religion during the Colonial Period

Over nearly 3 centuries of Spanish rule, the Catholic Church exercised significant influence on education, politics, and the economy. The Church and individual religious orders such as the Franciscans opened hospitals, established schools, built infrastructure, and provided other important social services. Meanwhile, Spanish colonial authorities grouped surviving indigenous inhabitants into **reducciones** or **misiones** (closed villages), where they toiled as servants and laborers and received basic literacy and religious education from Catholic clergy. During this period, a portion of Honduras' Caribbean coast came under British control (see p. 4 of *History and Myth*). In subsequent decades, some British Protestant missionaries arrived to proselytize among coastal populations, allowing Protestant churches to gain a modest following in Honduras' Southeast.

Catholic Church power continued to grow through the early 19th century, with priests exerting significant moral and political influence in society. In the years leading up to the nation's independence, some Catholic clergy assumed key roles in nationalist movements that sought Honduras' independence from Spain and later from the Federal Republic of Central America (see p. 5 of *History and Myth*).



## Religion and Politics in Independent Honduras

During much of the 19th century, there were power struggles between Liberal and Conservative political factions (see p. 5-6 of *History and Myth*), with a major point of disagreement the role of the Catholic Church in society. Conservatives encouraged the Church's involvement in social and political spheres, while Liberals sought to curb its power and influence especially in such areas as marriage, divorce, and education. Consequently, Church power and influence fluctuated along with transitions in government (see p. 6 of *History and Myth*).



While the Church received broad support when Conservatives were in power, Liberal authorities confiscated Church property, closed seminaries, and expelled monks for meddling in state affairs, among other actions. By the early 20th century, a prolonged period of Liberal control had reduced both the social and economic power of the Catholic Church and the number of Catholic clergy in Honduras.

### Religion in the 20th Century

Political instability, repressive governments (see p. 9-11 of *History and Myth*), and extreme poverty prompted the growth of new, activist religious movements across CENTAM in the mid-20th century. The most notable was “Liberation Theology” or



“Social Christianity,” a Roman Catholic school of thought advocating freedom from oppression, poverty, and injustice through political action.

By the late 1960s, increasing numbers of Catholic clergy, especially Franciscan and Jesuit priests, had

become vocal activists denouncing military oppression, US involvement in the region, and the suffering of the Honduran poor. Many worked directly with impoverished communities to promote social and economic reforms. As their political activism grew, outspoken religious leaders often became targets of government-sanctioned harassment, intimidation, and murder through the 1980s.

Meanwhile, Protestantism grew in popularity with the arrival of fundamental, evangelical, and Pentecostal missionaries. Such missionaries often traveled to remote areas, where they built schools and clinics, dug wells and irrigation systems, and provided medical assistance and other notable services to remote, underdeveloped areas. Protestantism spread rapidly starting in the 1970s and today continues to thrive especially among isolated, rural, and poor populations.

## Religion Today

Religion forms the spiritual backbone of Honduran society and influences most celebrations, rites of passage (see p. 4 of *Family and Kinship*), and daily life. Homes often feature Christian symbols,

while both men and women commonly wear crosses to demonstrate their faith. Moreover, many Hondurans believe that significant life events, such as accidents and illness, are a consequence of God's will. While most religious



organizations refrain from participating in the political process, the Catholic Church and some Protestant groups occasionally advise the Honduran government on public matters and, in some regions, retain close ties with local officials.

After experiencing steady and rapid growth since the 1970s, Protestant and other non-Catholic congregations comprise an increasing proportion of Honduras' Christian population. Besides Baptist, Moravian, Methodist, and other mainline Protestant denominations, Honduras is by some estimates home to some 300 evangelical Protestant sects that range in membership from a handful of practitioners to mega-churches with thousands of followers. Some of the larger evangelical groups include International Christian Center, Church of God, Assemblies of God, Abundant Life, Living Love, and Grand Commission churches. Generally, non-Catholic Christian denominations are found across the country.

Other religious groups include Seventh-day Adventists (with 144,000 followers), the Church of Latter-Day Saints (118,000), Jehovah's Witnesses (23,000), and Mennonites (18,000). Honduras is also home to small numbers of Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Orthodox Christians, among a few others.

Synagogues in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula support a small Jewish population, and some 2,500 Muslims concentrate in San Pedro Sula. While interfaith tensions are low and Honduras is generally free of interreligious violence, some non-Catholic groups, such as Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, and Jews report discrimination by local authorities.



Moreover, religious leaders generally are vulnerable to harassment and violence by criminal groups (see p. 9 of *Political and Social Relations*). For example, 1 study found that gangs murdered some 31 evangelical Protestant pastors for

refusing to pay extortion fees, during robberies and kidnappings, or as retaliation for their efforts to combat criminal activities between 2005-15.

### Religion and Indigenous Hondurans

While most indigenous Hondurans today identify as Catholic or Protestant, some practice a syncretic “folk” religion which incorporates traditional religious elements into their Christian worship. For example, some members of Lenca, Garifuna, and Miskito communities (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*)

celebrate rites of passage with songs and dances rooted in Amerindian and African beliefs and customs. They may also consult spiritual leaders or diviners (called **buyei** among the Garifuna) to communicate with



spirits and ancestors or conduct rituals to encourage good harvests, cure illness, or avoid misfortune.

## 4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

### Overview

The family is the center of Honduran life and provides an emotional, economic, and social safety net. Although violence and economic hardships have caused significant emigration and familial stress, Hondurans continue to prioritize their families, sharing good fortune with their relations and involving them in all important life decisions.

### Residence

Honduras experienced internal migration and urbanization during the 20th century, especially in and around Tegucigalpa and the northern city of San Pedro Sula. By 2023, 60% of the population live in urban areas. While just 55% of the population had access to electricity in 1990, that proportion had risen to 94% by 2021. As of 2020, 93% of the population had access to sanitation services and 96% to safe drinking water, up from 62% and 82% respectively in 2000.



**Urban:** Housing conditions in Honduras' urban areas vary significantly by income. Upper-class Hondurans tend to live in luxurious apartment buildings or single-family dwellings with pools and gardens. By contrast, middle income Hondurans generally occupy homes constructed of concrete, bricks, or cinderblocks, typically with red-tile or sheet metal roofs and back patios. The poorest Hondurans typically lack adequate shelter, often living in rows of connected shacks (*cuarterías*) in urban outskirts, sometimes centered around a communal, outdoor kitchen. These makeshift homes are often constructed of scrap wood, salvaged cinderblocks, or corrugated sheet metal and typically lack sewage and waste disposal.

**Rural:** Traditional rural homes (*bahareques*) are usually constructed of mudbrick, wooden boards, or concrete and

topped with metal, red-tile, or thatched roofs. Usually just 1-2 rooms, dwellings often feature a porch with hammocks for sleeping or relaxing.



Even those rural homes having electricity often lack modern appliances. Consequently, the kitchen is usually a separate structure housing a wood-burning stove on a raised platform. Yards often

feature fruit trees and house domestic animals such as pigs or chickens.

### Family Structure

In Honduran families, the father is traditionally the primary breadwinner and head of the household, except among the Garifuna, where women traditionally hold significant power in the family. Households tend to include extended family members, and even if they do not share a home, relatives often live in close proximity.

This traditional arrangement has changed over the last several decades. While many Hondurans have migrated within the country to seek economic opportunities or avoid the effects of natural disasters, others have left the country all together, often fleeing the violent activities of criminal gangs (see p. 9 of *Political and Social Relations*). As a result,



many Honduran families have been separated, with grandparents frequently raising the children of parents who have emigrated.

Nevertheless, the extended family remains an integral part of daily life, with relatives frequently spending time together over meals, at religious services, and during holidays and special

occasions. In addition, trusted family friends are brought into kin networks as **compadres** (godparents). Adult children, especially daughters, are expected to care for their aging parents within their own household.

### Children

Historically, Honduran families typically had many children but today have far fewer, particularly urban families which usually have just 2 or 3. Children often live with their parents until they marry, though some young people move away for education or employment opportunities. Although the legal working age is 14, young children in poorer families are expected to help supplement the family income, typically by working in agriculture or mining, street vending, or car washing. Other childhood responsibilities include caring for younger siblings and assisting with household or agricultural chores.



Children living in poverty face hardships such as abuse, sexual exploitation, gang violence, homelessness, and restricted



access to education (see p. 3-4 of *Learning and Knowledge*).

Incidents of violence often go unreported or unsolved, and forced displacement of children often results from gang intimidation or recruitment attempts. Some

children even attempt to migrate as unaccompanied minors, often to the US, to escape violence and a lack of economic and educational opportunities.

**Birth:** Before a child is born, the mother's family and friends typically hold a baby shower, bringing gifts for both the mother

and child. Following the birth, some mothers attach a small red object, such as a bracelet, to their baby to protect against the **mal de ojo**, (“evil eye”) believed to bring misfortune.

### Rites of Passage

Because most Hondurans are Christian (see p. 1 of *Religion and Spirituality*), they mark life’s milestones with Christian rites of

passage. For example, families usually baptize their children within a few weeks of birth and present them to the community at a Sunday mass. Children then celebrate their first communion and confirmation around age 10 and 14-16,

respectively. Hondurans also celebrate non-religious milestone events such as birthdays and graduations, with parties and gifts.



**Quinceañera:** Hondurans typically celebrate their daughters’ 15th birthday and entrance into womanhood with a formal party called a **Fiesta de Quince** (Party of 15) or *quinceañera*. A typical *quinceañera* celebration begins with a special Catholic mass in which the honored girl receives blessings from a priest. A party consisting of music, dancing, and food follows during which the young woman, typically dressed in a formal gown and tiara, ceremoniously replaces her flat shoes with high heels to enjoy a first dance with her father. Families often spend months planning and years saving for the celebration. Although still popular, many families cannot afford the expense and instead present their daughter with a meaningful gift.

**Dating and Courtship:** Boys and girls typically begin dating in their mid-teens. Socializing rarely involves a couple spending time alone. Instead, groups of friends gather in public settings, such as dances, parties, movies, and school or community-sponsored events. When older, many Hondurans like to socialize at nightclubs, malls, bars, or restaurants. When a couple decides to marry, the groom traditionally asks for permission from the bride’s father.



**Weddings:** Before the formal wedding festivities, families and friends often gather to throw bridal showers or bachelor and bachelorette parties. According to law, all couples must marry in a civil ceremony and register their marriage with the authorities. Most couples also have a religious ceremony in a church. In urban areas, a subsequent reception featuring feasting, music, and dancing is usually held at home or in a rented banquet hall. Because weddings can be expensive, some couples forego formal ceremonies and enter into a **unión de hecho** (common-law marriage) which the government officially recognizes after 3 years.

### Divorce

Although recent statistics are unavailable, Honduras' divorce rate was historically low. The rate rose slightly from 0.12 to 1.55 per 1,000 inhabitants between 1960-2008 and likely remains significantly lower than the US rate of 2.3 today. While Hondurans increasingly consider divorce acceptable for men, it remains highly stigmatized for women.

### Death

Following a death, the family typically holds a **velorio** (wake) at home or in a funeral home that sometimes includes an all-night vigil. During the wake, friends and relatives visit to pay respects, grieve, and reminisce with the family of the deceased. A priest



typically offers prayers. Following this 24-hour period, family and friends attend a church service then accompany the coffin in a procession to the cemetery for burial. For the 9 days following the funeral, a period known as the **novena**, Catholic families say special

prayers at home or attend special church services. Similar remembrances are typically held 40 days and 6 months after a death. On November 2, Hondurans commemorate **Día de los Fieles Difuntos** (Day of the Deceased or All Souls Day) by gathering at cemeteries to decorate family graves with flowers and ornaments.



## 5. SEX AND GENDER

### Overview

Traditionally, Honduras has had a male-dominated society where ***machismo*** (strong masculine pride) is counterbalanced by female subservience (***marianismo***). The Honduran social system is patriarchal, meaning that men hold most power and authority. Today, women and men have equal rights before the law, yet traditional attitudes continue to hinder women's full participation in educational, economic, and political spheres.

### Gender Roles and Work

Honduran society maintains a distinct division between the genders. Men typically serve as the head of the household and primary breadwinner, while women are responsible for most household chores and childcare even if they work outside the home. In rural areas, women often tend the family crops in addition to their household work.



**Labor Force:** In 2023 about 50% of

women worked outside the home, higher than rates in neighboring Guatemala (41%) and El Salvador (46%) but lower than the US (57%). Women make up the majority of workers in Honduras's ***maquilas*** (export-oriented assembly factories – see p. 2 of *Economics and Resources*), while men traditionally predominate in agriculture and construction. *Maquilas* typically offer poor working conditions, long hours beyond legal limits, sub-minimum pay, and frequent workplace accidents.

Other than manufacturing, women typically concentrate in jobs traditionally considered “female,” such as housecleaning, secretarial work, teaching, healthcare, and the restaurant and hotel sectors. Honduran women earn around 65% of men's wages for equal work, compared to 84% in the US.

## Gender and the Law

Despite legal guarantees to gender equality, authorities often fail to enforce pertinent laws and adequately fund programs aimed at reducing inequities. For example, although the law stipulates that certain businesses must provide childcare, many decline to comply and face few if any repercussions. In addition, many employers unlawfully terminate the employment of pregnant women and nursing mothers. Many women are unaware of their rights or are reluctant to report abuses due to employer or police intimidation. Although the law mandates equal property rights,



traditional customs dissuade women from pursuing land and property ownership. Consequently, women often lack collateral for credit and loans, creating barriers for their equal economic opportunity.

## Gender and Politics

Since 2000, laws have required that women comprise an increasing proportion of both national and sub-national candidates for political office, reaching 50% in 2016. The law also reserves at least 21% of seats in the National Congress for women. This rate was achieved in the 2017 elections and surpassed in the 2021 elections to 27% yet is the same than rates in neighboring El Salvador (27%) and lower than the US (29% as of 2023) but higher than Guatemala (20%). Nevertheless, few women hold congressional leadership positions.

While traditional attitudes tend to discourage women from pursuing government-service positions, Honduras has had many prominent female activists, most notably the late environmental and indigenous rights activist Berta Cáceres. In 2021, Iris Castro was elected as country's first female President (see *Political and Social Relations*).

## Gender Based Violence (GBV)

Honduras' violent death rate for females is among the world's highest, while sexual assault and violence against women are

widespread. Crimes often go unreported due to intimidation, and although special offices and prosecutors are tasked with reducing GBV and punishing perpetrators, they are often underfunded and have limited power to seek justice. As a result, some 95% of crimes against women go uninvestigated and unpunished.

GBV is often related to criminal gang activities (see *Political and Social Relations*). Gangs often forcibly recruit girls and young women, coercing them into illegal activities or sexual slavery. Further, females are also vulnerable to abuse by law enforcement authorities. Should a young woman attempt to

resist, she and her family become targets for GBV and murder.



Domestic abuse of women is also widespread, which experts trace to several causes, notably the

widespread

*machismo*-related notions that men naturally wield power over women and that women “provoke” violence when they do not comply with male expectations regarding their dress or behavior. To escape sexual violence, many young women and their families flee to other countries, such as Mexico or the US. Between 2014-16, Mexico’s immigration authority apprehended some 15,000 CENTAM girls aged 12-17 (many from Honduras) who claimed to be escaping sexual violence in their home countries

### Sex and Procreation

Hondurans traditionally view sexual intimacy as a private matter appropriate only within marriage. Nevertheless, according to *machismo* norms, it is socially acceptable for men to boast about their sexual conquests, while women are expected to remain chaste. At 2.3 births per woman, Honduras’ fertility rate is lower than Guatemala (2.4) but higher than that of El Salvador (1.08) and the US (1.7).

Early marriage or partnership (before age 18) is common, with some 34% of Hondurans married by age 18 as of 2019. While a 2017 law raised the minimum marriage age from 16 to 18 and closed certain loopholes allowing child marriage, early marriage is generally accepted and common in rural areas. Early marriage plus widespread sexual abuse of girls contributes to a high adolescent fertility rate, with some 71% of Honduran girls aged 15-19 having had at least 1 child in 2022

While lawmakers have mandated a sex education curriculum, implementation has stalled. Access to contraception is often restricted, and since 2009, the government has banned emergency oral contraception. Further, abortion is illegal under



all circumstances and can result in a prison sentence of up to 6 years for the woman and 8 years for the provider. As a result, many victims of sexual violence are forced to obtain dangerous, illegal abortions, with observers estimating that some 900 girls under the age of 14 had such procedures in 2015.

### **Homosexuality in Honduras**

The law recognizes neither same-sex marriage nor civil unions. While anti-discrimination laws apply to homosexual individuals, discrimination and harassment are widespread and incidents are rarely reported or investigated. Consequently, few homosexual individuals self-identify for fear of discrimination and abuse. Homosexual individuals are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking, and some have faced targeted assault from gangs, causing them to flee the country. Further, violence and intimidation against those supportive of homosexual rights is also widespread.

At this time, the US State Department has a Status of Forces Agreement in place for Honduras. Service members will be held accountable to the Uniformed Code of Military Justice.

## 6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

### Language Overview

Spanish is Honduras' official language and the primary language of business, government, education, and the media.

### Spanish

Spanish explorers and conquerors brought their language to the region beginning in the 16th century (see p. 2-3 of *History and Myth*). Today, some 99% of Hondurans speak it as a native language. Spanish uses the same alphabet as English with 1 additional consonant – ñ (pronounced like the “ny” in the word canyon). The similar alphabet, consistent spelling patterns, and

Latin base make Spanish relatively easy for English speakers to learn.

Honduran Spanish, known as **español**, differs from that spoken in most other Latin American countries in its use of certain words and grammatical structures. Most

significantly, Hondurans use **vos** in addition to **tú** for the informal “you.” They also employ, **hondureñismos**, words and expressions like “**cheque**” (“all right”), **vaya pues** (many meanings, most generally “okay”), and **catracho** (“Honduran” as a nationality) that are specific to Honduras. Nevertheless, Honduran Spanish is mutually intelligible with other Spanish dialects from around the world.

### Indigenous Languages

Several indigenous languages are spoken in isolated parts of Honduras, though the degree to which they have been preserved varies. Despite government preservation efforts, such as creating programs to encourage intercultural bilingual education and establishing a State Secretariat of Indigenous and Afro-Descendant People, numbers of speakers continue to decline, although the extent is unknown. As of 1993, some 29,000 Hondurans spoke Mískito (see p. 12 of *Political and*



*Social Relations*), though primarily as a second language. While many Hondurans still identify with their respective ethnic groups (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*), few people still speak Garifuna, Pech, Mayangna, and Tol, while Ch'orti' and Lenca, have no known native speakers.

### Other Languages

Honduras is home to speakers of several immigrant languages. At the end of the 19th century and during World War I, Arab migrants from the Ottoman Empire arrived in Honduras,

and today there are some 34,000 Arabic speakers in the country. Western Armenian and Yue Chinese are also spoken in smaller numbers.



### English

English proficiency varies widely depending on location. In Tegucigalpa and tourist areas like Roatán and the other Bay Islands, many Hondurans speak and understand English. The language is occasionally used in business settings, media, and entertainment. Creole English, brought by immigrants from the West Indies and Belize, is also spoken in the Bay Islands.

### Communication Overview

Effective communication in Honduras requires not only knowledge of Spanish but also the ability to interact effectively using language. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

### Communication Style

Communication patterns tend to vary with Honduras' ethnic and cultural diversity yet generally reflect a society-wide emphasis

on respect. Hondurans are warm, friendly, easygoing, and value politeness in social settings.

As is common throughout Latin America, ***machismo*** attitudes (see p. 1 of *Sex and Gender*) are widespread, with men sometimes making derogatory and suggestive comments about women to their male friends or directly to women. Foreign nationals should avoid participating in such discussions.



### Greetings

In urban settings, women often greet friends and relatives with a hug and kiss on the cheek and typically offer a nod to strangers. Men generally shake hands. In rural areas, Hondurans tend to be more reserved, shaking hands instead of kissing. In business settings, a

handshake is appropriate, though a man should wait for a woman to initiate the greeting. Hondurans use a variety of verbal greetings, most of which refer to the time of day. ***Buenos días*** (“good morning”), ***buenas tardes*** (“good afternoon”), and ***buenas noches*** (“good night”) are the most common, as is ***buen provecho*** (“bon appétit”), a popular greeting before a meal.

### Forms of Address

Forms of address depend on age, social status, and relationship but are generally formal and courteous. In all but the most informal situations, Hondurans use titles of respect such as ***señor*** (“Mr.”), ***señora*** (“Mrs.”), and ***señorita*** (for young/unmarried women). To demonstrate special deference to elders or those of a higher social class, Hondurans use the honorifics ***Don*** (for males) or ***Doña*** (for females) along with the first name. Professional titles such as ***doctor/a*** (“doctor”), ***profesor/a*** (“teacher”), and ***ingeniero/a*** (“engineer”) are often used alone, with the last name(s), or with the full name. Similarly, Hondurans refer to those who have completed a university degree as ***licenciado/a***.

Spanish has different “you” pronouns and verb conjugations depending on the level of formality. Hondurans tend to use the polite “*usted*” in formal and informal settings, although some business colleagues prefer the familiar “*tú*” or “*vos*” typically used with friends, family, and younger people. Vos is used more frequently than *tú*.

**Names:** A Honduran name typically comprises 1-2 first names and 2 last names. The 2 last names indicate the person’s family heritage. For example, in the full name of President Juan Orlando Hernández Alvarado, Hernández is his father’s family name, while Alvarado is his mother’s. Hondurans often shorten the full name by omitting the maternal family name, using Juan Orlando Hernández. Upon marriage, a woman typically replaces her maternal family name with her husband’s paternal name.

### Conversational Topics

After initial polite greetings, Hondurans typically engage in light conversation about work and family. Soccer is another popular topic of conversation. To avoid offense, foreign nationals should avoid discussing sensitive topics such as gang violence, current politics, and religion.



### Gestures

Many Hondurans use gestures to accentuate or replace spoken words. As in the US, the thumbs-up, known as **cheque**, is a positive signal. Hondurans do not beckon with their index fingers, instead using with an open hand. To signal “no,” Hondurans wave the index finger back and forth. To point, Hondurans purse their lips in the indicated direction. To express enthusiasm, Hondurans tend to snap.

### Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) and click on “Resources” for access to language training and other resources.



## Useful Words and Phrases

English	Spanish
Hello	Hola
How are you?	¿Cómo está usted?
I am well	Estoy bien
Yes	Sí
No	No
Please	Por favor
Thank you	Gracias
You are welcome	De nada
I'm sorry	Lo siento
I don't understand	No entiendo
What is your name?	¿Cuál es su nombre? / ¿Cómo se llama?
My name is ____	Me llamo ____
Where are you from?	¿De dónde es usted?
I am from the US	Yo soy de los Estados Unidos
Goodbye	Adiós
Good morning/evening	Buenos días / Buenas tardes
What does ____ mean?	¿Qué significa ____?
What is this?	¿Qué es esto?
I would like a ____	Quisiera un/a ____
How do you say ____?	¿Cómo se dice ____?
...in English?	...en inglés?
...in Spanish?	...en español?
What do you want?	¿Qué quiere usted?
What time is it?	¿Qué hora es?
Where is the doctor?	¿Dónde está el médico?
Who?	¿Quién?
When?	¿Cuándo?
Where?	¿Dónde?
Which?	¿Cuál?
Why?	¿Por qué?

## 7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

### Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 89%
- Male: 88%
- Female: 89% (2019 estimate)

### Early Education

Before the arrival of the Spanish conquerors (see p. 2-3 of *History and Myth*), most regional inhabitants informally transmitted values, skills, beliefs, historical knowledge, and a sense of community to younger generations. It is also likely that Maya religious specialists taught math, science, astronomy, medicine, and writing to the children of nobles (see p. 1-2 of *History and Myth*).

### Education in Colonial Honduras

Following Spain's conquest and colonization of the region, most colonial education efforts were associated with attempts to convert the indigenous inhabitants to Christianity (see p. 2-3 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Throughout the 16th-17th centuries, various Roman Catholic religious orders established missions to instruct indigenous peoples in the Catholic faith.

Over the centuries of colonization, the Spanish viewed the indigenous population largely as a labor pool and consequently saw little reason to



expand educational offerings to them beyond basic literacy. By contrast, the Roman Catholic orders provided some additional education opportunities for Spanish residents, opening a primary school in Tegucigalpa in 1822. Nevertheless, opportunities for higher education remained nonexistent, and students had to travel to neighboring Guatemala or Nicaragua to attend university.

## Education after Independence

The 1824 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Central America (see p. 5 of *History and Myth*) made education the responsibility of the legislative branch. Some 8 years later, the government passed a law requiring the construction of a school in every town in the Republic. Nevertheless, this edict was largely ignored.

Following the 1841 collapse of the Republic, newly-independent Honduras founded the country's first post-secondary institution, the National University of Honduras in 1847. Although there were other attempts to improve educational offerings after



independence, formal learning opportunities remained scarce.

Realizing the severe lack of opportunities for academic advancement (see p. 7 of *History and Myth*), the government made repeated attempts to improve the country's educational system,

though it had little success. By the 1870s, only 9,000 Hondurans were attending school. This situation changed in the 1880s, when education finally became more accessible under the leadership of a Liberal President (see p. 7 of *History and Myth*), who introduced compulsory public primary education and removed Catholic Church influence from higher education. He also initiated construction of the National Library of Honduras, the nation's first library.

In 1881, the government created a code of public instruction, and the compulsory curriculum grew to include Christian doctrine, ethics and manners, reading and writing, arithmetic, and, for girls, sewing. Despite this progress, other critical challenges soon forced the government to abandon its focus on education. Generally, school attendance in the 19th century largely remained a luxury open only to those who could afford private education.

## Education in the 20th Century

Honduras' education system improved considerably beginning in the late 19th century. Between 1870-1900, Honduras more than tripled the number of schools to over 850 and by 1900, was home to 15 secondary schools and a training institute for teachers. However, Honduras' national education system remained undeveloped until 1957 when President Ramón Villeda Morales (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*) introduced educational reforms establishing a national public education system and initiating a school construction program.

Villeda's reforms improved education significantly: between 1960-66, enrollment rates in primary schools and the number of elementary school teachers doubled. Further, between 1950-67, secondary school enrollment grew from 4,000 to some 32,000. In the 1970s, a loss of confidence in public offerings boosted growth in the private sector, especially at the secondary level. Today, some 90% of primary schools are public, but some 58% secondary schools are private.

## Modern Education

Today, Honduras' education system consists of pre-primary, primary, secondary, and post-



secondary levels. By law, public education is free and obligatory for children aged 5-16, although enrollment is not strictly enforced – in 2020, Hondurans' average schooling was about 9.6 years. Government spending on education as a percentage of total of GDP was 4.4% in 2022, lower than El Salvador (4.5%) and higher than Guatemala (3.2%).

Nevertheless, the education system remains significantly underfunded despite sizeable amounts of foreign aid. Access to education varies, particularly in rural areas which lack quality schools. Where schools are available, classrooms are often overcrowded, with up to 80 students per teacher. While education is free, the costs of supplies and uniforms are prohibitive for

many families. A 2019 study found that around 618,739 Hondurans, or some 28% percent of the population between the ages of 5-17, had no access to education. Some students quit school to work (see p. 3 of *Family and Kinship*), while others drop out because of personal or other reasons such as gang violence (see p. 9 of *Political and Social Relations*). Furthermore, natural disasters have restricted access to education in certain regions. For example, in 1998, Hurricane Mitch (see p. 3 of *Political and Social Relations*) damaged some 20% of Honduran schools, destroying facilities and materials, and preventing many children from receiving a proper schooling.

Most recently, the government initiated the 2012 Fundamental Education Law, increasing mandatory education to 12 years (3 years of pre-primary plus grades 1-9). A centralized basic curriculum was also created with the ***Currículo Nacional Básico***, outlining competencies and expectations set by the Secretary of Education. The government has also tried to expand learning for those who cannot attend school in person, such as the ***Instituto Hondureño de Educación por Radio***, a distance learning radio project that provides flexible, informal learning opportunities to all ages.

**Pre-Primary:** According to the 2012 law, Honduran children have the right to 3 years of free, public pre-primary programs, but due to a lack of resources, just 1 year (at age 5) is currently

mandatory. About 34% of children of the appropriate age attended pre-primary school in 2021.



**Primary Education:**

Comprising 9 grades starting at age 6, primary or basic education divides into 3 cycles of 3 years

each. The curriculum consists of Spanish language, math, science, social studies, physical education, and technology. *Approximately 87% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in basic education in 2019.*

**Secondary Education:** Students have 2 options for their non-compulsory secondary education, a 2-year general (academic) or 3-year vocational/technical program. Technical schools are popular, educating some 37% of 15-year-olds. Graduates of both programs may continue to post-secondary programs. About 44% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in secondary education in 2019.

There is a distinctive gender gap at this level: in 2022, 37% of girls but only 29% of boys completed their secondary education.

**Post-Secondary:** Only about 19% of students who complete basic education eventually continue on to post-secondary programs at technical-vocational institutions, teacher training institutes, or universities. Technical institutions award several degrees, such as **técnico** (technician) after 2 years of

study and **tecnólogo** (technologist) after 4 years. Teacher training institutes award the title of **profesorado** after 3 years of study. Five years of university study leads to degrees such as the **licenciado** (equivalent to a US Bachelor's degree), **arquitecto** (architect), and **ingeniero** (engineer). After additional years of study, students may receive their Master's or Doctorate degrees.

In 2022, barely 200,000 Honduran students were enrolled in the 21 public and private universities. The **Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras** (National Autonomous University of Honduras or UNAH), with its main campus in Tegucigalpa and 2 branch campuses in La Ceiba and San Pedro Sula, is the main public university and is considered Honduras' flagship institution. UNAH offers 131 programs of study to some 54,768 students in 2024. Several private institutions also offer post-secondary programs of study, though their quality varies widely.



## 8. TIME AND SPACE

### Overview

Hondurans tend to view interpersonal relationships as key to conducting business interactions. A casual attitude towards punctuality prevails alongside a strong work ethic.

### Time and Work

Honduras's work week typically runs Monday-Friday from 8am-5pm with a midday break for lunch. While hours vary, many shops open Monday-Saturday from 9am-6pm with a break for lunch. Most banks are open Monday-Friday from 8:30am-4:30pm and on Saturday from 8:30am-12pm. Post office hours are typically Monday-Friday from 8am-5pm and on Saturday from 8am-12pm. Most businesses close on Sundays and for the duration of public holidays.



### Working Environment:

Honduran labor laws establish an 8-hour workday, 44-hour workweek, and at least one 24-hour period of rest per week. Labor laws also guarantee 11 paid national holidays, 10 days of paid vacation after 1 year of work, and 20 days after 4 years. Despite these and other worker rights and protections, lax enforcement and a large informal sector enable violations like workplace discrimination, deficient workplace safety standards, child labor (see p. 3 of *Family and Kinship*), and a 6-day workweek.

**Time Zone:** Honduras adheres to Central Standard Time (CST), which is 6 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 1 hour behind Eastern Standard Time (EST). Honduras does not observe daylight savings time.

**Date Notation:** Like the US, Honduras uses the Western (Gregorian) calendar. Unlike in the US, Hondurans write the day first, followed by the month and year.

## National Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- March / April: Holy Thursday (dates vary)
- March / April: Good Friday (dates vary)
- March / April: Easter Saturday (dates vary)
- April 14: Day of the Americas
- May 1: Labor Day
- September 15: Central American Independence Day
- October 3: Francisco Morazán's Birthday (see p. 6 of *History and Myth*)
- October: **Día de la Raza** (celebration of Hispanic heritage) (dates vary)
- October: Honduran Armed Forces Day (dates vary)
- December 25: Christmas Day

## Time and Business

Rapport-building activities such as business lunches are common and tend to run long, allowing colleagues additional time to get to know each other before beginning business negotiations. Meetings can often end without definite agreements as final decisions typically require top-level approval. Most businesses close on Sundays and for the duration of public holidays and some businesses Easter Week.

Communications are typically formal, with subordinates addressing superiors by their titles (see p. 3 of *Language and Communication*). Hondurans tend to prefer indirect communication over frank confrontation and as a result, they may proceed slowly to the main topic of discussion.

Consequently, meetings often lack a formal agenda and tend to exceed allotted times. Furthermore, a relaxed attitude towards punctuality is not considered rude. Nevertheless, Hondurans are dedicated hard employees, who usually compensate for tardiness by working overtime.



## Personal Space

As in most societies, personal space in Honduras depends on the nature of the relationship. Distance tends to diminish with familiarity. For example, Hondurans maintain more space when meeting strangers, yet friends typically stand much closer when conversing.

**Touch:** Hondurans typically engage in more conversational touching than Americans, particularly among men, who frequently use arm or shoulder pats to emphasize points in conversation.



**Eye Contact:** Hondurans generally consider direct eye contact during conversations as evidence of honesty and engagement. Hondurans in rural areas tend to lower their heads as a sign of respect when conversing with strangers.

## Photographs

Foreign nationals should acquire a Honduran's consent before taking his photo. Some Hondurans may expect compensation in return, while some indigenous people or those in rural areas prefer not to be photographed. In addition, churches or rural villages sometimes prohibit photography.

## Driving

Road conditions in Honduras are inconsistent and often lack adequate illumination and signage. Streets are generally better maintained within cities, while roads outside of major urban areas are often unpaved. Some drivers ignore lane markings and disregard traffic laws, often speeding, passing on blind corners, and neglecting to use turn signals. In 2021, Honduras' rate of 21.9 traffic-related deaths per 100,000 people was higher than neighboring Guatemala (13) higher than the US rate (14). Driving at night can be dangerous due to the activities of criminal gangs (see p. 9 of Political and Social Relations). Further, both gangs and military and police authorities occasionally detain drivers to demand bribes.

## 9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

### Overview

Honduras' dress, recreation, music, and arts reflect the country's indigenous customs, colonial influences, and religious traditions.

### Dress and Appearance

Hondurans generally favor a neat, clean, and modest appearance. Men typically wear collared shirts with slacks, while women favor cotton dresses or skirts/pants with blouses. Many younger Hondurans prefer jeans and the latest US fashion trends. Despite the warm climate, only children, adults visiting the beach, or engaging in athletic activities wear shorts.

**Traditional:** Hondurans typically wear traditional attire only for special events such as dances, national holidays, or cultural celebrations. Traditional women's wear varies by region and reflects both indigenous and Spanish colonial influences. For example, the styles of many of Honduras' indigenous groups, such as the Lenca and Ch'ortí (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*), typically feature colorful handwoven skirts and shawls.

By contrast, Spanish colonial styles are evident in Honduras' national costume, the **Traje de Intibucá**. Traditionally made of a white cotton fabric called **manta**, this long dress typically features ruffles, ribbons, or lace. Women often finish the look with braided hair topped with a floral decoration. Men's traditional styles commonly feature white cotton or linen pants, long-sleeved shirts that fall just below the waist, straw hats, and red bandana scarves. Shirts often are embellished with colored ribbon along the cuffs or chest. Alternatively, some men prefer the traditional **guayabera**, a dress shirt with rows of vertical pleats worn untucked.



## Recreation

Hondurans typically spend their leisure time with family and friends. Common activities include sharing meals, listening to music, and playing pick-up soccer. Movie theatres are popular in urban areas, where young people also enjoy spending time at malls. Urban-dwellers also enjoy returning to their towns of origin for holiday visits. Honduras' tourist areas, such as the islands of Roatán and Utila, offer scuba diving, snorkeling, swimming, and sport fishing, although these activities are typically only accessible to wealthier Hondurans.

**Festivals:** Hondurans enjoy a variety of festivals and community celebrations, some demonstrating their national pride. For example, in July, Hondurans celebrate **Día de Lempira** or Lempira Day, in honor of the 16th-century Lenca chief who resisted the Spanish conquerors (see p. 3 of *History and Myth*). The small town of Gracias in the Department of Lempira hosts the largest celebration which features a parade of elaborately costumed celebrants and fireworks.

Other festivals reflect the country's Catholic roots (see p. 2-3 of *Religion and Spirituality*). For example, communities typically celebrate their patron saint each year with days of festivities that include religious ceremonies and holy processions, parties, carnivals, and feasting. The celebration of Honduras' patron saint, the Virgin of Suyapa, called the **Feria de Suyapa** is a

week-long celebration in February that attracts pilgrims from all over CENTAM.



Easter celebrations take place during a period known as **Semana Santa** ("Holy Week", consisting of Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday). Eastertime is

also Honduras' busiest travel and tourist season. Traditionally, communities stage reenactments of biblical stories and host religious processions. They also hire artists to create elaborate designs of colored sand and sawdust called **alfombras** ("rugs") that create a colorful pathway for the processions.

During the Christmas season, children dress in costumes and journey from house-to-house, recreating Mary and Joseph's search for refuge in a ritual called **las posadas** ("the inns"). In early January, Hondurans celebrate **Día de los Reyes Magos** (Three Kings Day) with a special pastry. The same month, some communities celebrate the Lenca tradition of **Guancasco** with an exchange of patron saint statues, dances, and games.

**Sports:** **Fútbol** (soccer) is Honduras' most popular sport and national pastime. Local recreational leagues and pick-up street matches are popular among adults and children alike. Many Hondurans passionately follow the sport at the local, national, and international levels, and Honduras' men's national team has been a strong contender during World Cup, Central American Cup, and Pan American competitions. Other popular sports include volleyball, basketball, baseball, and tennis.

**Games:** Hondurans like to play chess, checkers, pool, and dominoes. Popular children's games include **los trompos** (spinning tops), **rayuela**



(hopscotch), and **landa** (a form of tag). Another popular game is **la cebolla** ("the onion"), which involves a line of children trying to loosen the grip of a child holding a tree trunk.

### Music and Dance

Traditional Honduran music often centers around the **marimba** (wooden xylophone). *Marimba* folk music is often accompanied by guitars, accordions, flutes, trumpets, maracas (a gourd-shaped rattle filled with seeds or pebbles), and other percussion instruments. Musicians sometimes also incorporate indigenous and African-influenced instruments such as the **caparazón de tortuga** (an empty turtle shell played with sticks), **la caramba** (a gourd attached to a wooden shaft with strings), and **la concha de caracol** (a conch shell). The music of the Garifuna (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*) traditionally features drums made of animal hides stretched over turtle shells or hollowed cedar or mahogany trunks. Other Latin music genres such as

Colombian *salsa* and *cumbia*, Mexican *ranchera*, and Puerto Rican *reggaetón* are also popular.



Honduras is home to many styles of dance that demonstrate indigenous, African, and Spanish influences. Some dances portray specific events such as *Las Escobas* (“the brooms”), which features dancers carrying brooms decorated with colorful ribbons and flowers to symbolize the cleaning of churches before community feasts. The dance, *Amor en Puyitas* (“pinpricks of love”) portrays traditional courtship and the emotions of young couples in love.

Other dances are inspired by historical events such as the “masked warrior dance,” *maladío wanáragua*, which represents the historical struggle of the Garifuna against the British (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*). Perhaps the most well-known Honduran dance is the Garifuna *punta*, a traditional courtship dance that involves call-and-response drumming and singing along with quick steps. Inspired by this traditional style, contemporary musicians have created Punta Rock, a genre that combines styles popular across the Caribbean and Latin America, such as hip hop, calypso, salsa, and reggae with Garifuna drums.

### Theater and Film

Traditional theater consists primarily of short dramatizations of religious stories, often performed during festivals or around the holidays. These public plays typically feature elaborate costumes and props in addition to music, dance, and theatrical dialogue. Other performances are known as *bailes de Moros y Cristianos* (“dances of the Moors and Christians”). Performed since colonial times, these dramatic, historical pageants portray the Spanish reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula from the North African Moors as an epic victory of good over evil. The Honduran film industry is small due to a lack of financial resources and technical training opportunities. Nevertheless, Honduras has recently seen some growth in the industry. In 2017, the film

*Morazán*, which relates a Honduran general's effort to unite CENTAM (see p. 6 of *History and Myth*), became Honduras' first-ever entry for an Academy Award.

## Literature

In the mid-19th century, poetry and short stories grew in popularity. Founder of Honduras' first university (see p. 2 of *Learning and Knowledge*) and considered a national hero, Father José Trinidad Reyes published several **pastorelas** or religiously based dramas. At the turn of the 20th century, Honduran literature experienced a blossoming of modernism and romanticism, with writers focusing on themes of nature, the passage of time, and love. Two prominent authors from the time include Juan Ramón Molina, who helped found several of the country's literary reviews and whose name adorns the National Library, and Lucila Gamero de Medina, a prominent feminist who was 1 of the first Honduran women to produce literary works.

Writers in the 20th century explored themes related to national identity, workers' rights, and social realism. Prominent authors include Ramón Amaya Amador, known for his work *Prisión Verde* (Green Prison) depicting the harsh working conditions under the powerful fruit companies (see p. 7 of *History and Myth*), and Argentina Díaz Lozano, the only CENTAM woman whose work has been considered for the Nobel Prize. In recent decades, authors such as Roberto Sosa and Amanda Castro have explored women's rights, poverty, globalization, and migration.

## Visual Arts and Crafts

Honduras has a rich tradition of folk arts and crafts. Common art forms include small, brightly painted animals made of wood or clay; woven baskets and sleeping mats; shell jewelry; metal and leatherwork; and carved wooden boxes that depict natural or village scenes. The Lenca (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*) are known for their intricately carved black and white pottery, while the town of Valle de Angeles near Tegucigalpa is famous for its craft markets.



## 10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

### Sustenance Overview

Hondurans enjoy socializing with friends and family over lengthy meals at home or in cafes and restaurants. Honduran cuisine is varied and extensive, characterized by fresh ingredients and seasoned with bold and fragrant herbs and spices.

### Dining Customs

Hondurans typically supplement 3 daily meals with light mid-morning and mid-afternoon snacks. While the mid-day meal is usually the largest in rural areas, the evening meal also tends to be substantial, particularly in urban settings. Honduran women



prepare meals using fresh produce, meats, and dairy products purchased daily from local markets. Rural cooks tend to prepare food outdoors over wood burning fires.

Hondurans often reserve Sunday afternoons for visiting friends and family, who sometimes drop by

unannounced for short, informal visits during the week. When guests arrive, hosts typically offer light snacks paired with coffee, tea, juice, or other beverages. When invited to a home for a formal meal or to celebrate a special occasion, guests tend to arrive a few minutes late and typically present the host with a small gift, such as flowers or sweets. Hosts usually serve their guests first. After guests finish their portions, they usually must decline several offers for more servings. Diners generally wish each other "***Buen provecho***" ("Bon appétit") to begin a meal.

### Diet

Considered a sacred crop by many of the region's pre-conquest inhabitants (see p. 1-2 of *History and Myth*), corn remains Honduras' primary staple and is incorporated into most meals. While corn is served in a variety of ways, the most common preparation is roasting and grinding it into coarse flour to make

round, flat bread (**tortillas**). Other common staples include rice, wheat, and beans. Rice is often served steamed or fried with chopped vegetables in oil, while wheat flour is used to make wheat *tortillas*, breads, and noodles. Beans are a particularly prominent and versatile component of the Honduran diet and an important source of protein for those who cannot afford meat or fish. Beans may be stewed, mashed and fried, or incorporated into a variety of soups and fillings.

Popular forms of protein in interior and mountainous regions include beef, pork, and chicken. Hondurans living along the coasts enjoy a rich assortment of seafood, such as spiny lobster, shrimp, conch, flounder, and red snapper. Honduran cooks tend to brightly season dishes with mixtures of cumin, cilantro, chilies, cinnamon, cloves, citrus juices, vinegar, and **annatto** (boiled seeds from the fruit of the achiote tree), among other spices and herbs. **Chilmol** – a fresh sauce of chopped tomatoes, onions, peppers, and salt – is a popular accompaniment to grilled meat and other dishes.

In addition to corn and beans, native vegetables include cassava (a tuberous, starchy root), yams, potatoes, cabbage, peppers, carrots, beets, onions, and avocados. Available



year-round, popular fruits include limes, lemons, guavas, plums, papayas, bananas, **guineos** (green bananas), plantains (member of the banana family), mangos, tamarind (a fibrous, sour fruit), cherimoya (a mild, custard-like fruit), soursop (a small, green fruit with a soft, sweet interior), and nance (a small, round, sweet yellow fruit with a strong scent). Coconuts feature prominently in coastal cuisine, where cooks bake coconut meat flakes into breads, sauté fish in coconut oil, and thicken soups and stews with coconut milk.

### Popular Dishes and Meals

The terms **comida típica** or **plato típico** (typical food) refer to a common meal eaten at any time of the day. It usually includes



boiled or fried plantains, white cheese, sausage, **mantequilla** (a thick, semisweet cream), and fried eggs along with a salad of sliced cabbage and tomato or fresh avocado. In rural areas or among poorer families, breakfast may comprise just a stack of *tortillas* with a small serving of stewed beans and thick, sweet coffee. An alternative breakfast drink is a cup of hot milk boiled with sugar, lime, and cinnamon, and sometimes with small cubes of bread.

For lunch and dinner, Hondurans traditionally consume a heartier, larger version of the *plato típico*. Some add meat dishes, such as thick stews and soups or **carne asada** (a variety of grilled meats) paired with rice, boiled or fried beans, and *tortillas*. Along the coasts, stews incorporating fish, conch, and shrimp with various root vegetables are common fare. By contrast, the daily meals of poor, rural families may comprise

only *tortillas* with beans, salty cheese, and home-grown fresh vegetables.

Other common dishes include **baleadas** (flour *tortillas* topped with refried beans, scrambled eggs, cheese, and **crema**,



a thick, savory cream); **nacatamales** (cornmeal dough stuffed with cheese, bits of meat, or vegetables and steamed in a banana leaf); **pupusas** or **burra** (thick corn *tortillas* stuffed with meat, cheese, or vegetables); **pastelitos** (corn *tortillas* stuffed with meat or vegetables); and **tapado** (a meat and vegetable stew with many regional variations). Hondurans consume a variety of desserts such as thick guava paste served with white, salty cheese, **torrejas** (a sweet bread made from roasted corn kernels), and **arroz con leche** (rice cooked in milk and sugar).

### Eating Out

Hondurans tend to eat out often. Urban restaurants range from upscale establishments, specializing in international cuisine to inexpensive **comedores** (casual eateries) serving a *plato típico*

and other hearty Honduran meals. Street stalls offer snacks like *baleadas*, *pastelitos*, **yucca con chicharrón** (fried cassava and pork rinds), **pinchos** (grilled skewered meat), **tajadas** (fried, lightly salted plantain chips), and **fritas** (fried cakes of cornmeal, sugar, and milk). Along the coasts, open-air seaside cafes specialize in fried fish, coconut-based stews, and **ceviche** (raw seafood cured in lemon or lime juice and mixed with herbs and spices). Restaurants typically do not add a surcharge to the bill, but servers typically expect a 10-15% tip for good service.

## Beverages

Hondurans tend to drink tea and coffee in the mornings and late afternoons.

They also drink freshly squeezed juice from guavas, papayas, pineapples, and mangos, among other fruits. **Charamuscas** or **topogigios**, frozen fruit juice served in plastic bags, are popular treats in the hotter months. Other beverages include **horchata** (a paste of seeds, nuts, rice, and cinnamon blended with sugar and water or milk) and **chilate** (a spicy mix of corn, cocoa, and chilies). Common alcoholic beverages include locally-brewed beer, rum, **aguardiente** (a sugarcane liquor similar to rum), **guaro** (a lightly sweet, clear sugarcane brandy), **chicha** (a sweet wine made from fermented pineapples and other fruit), and Garifuna-made **guifiti** (a rum-based drink incorporating a variety of herbs, roots, leaves, branches, flowers, and seeds).

## Health Overview

While the overall health of Hondurans has improved in recent decades, some serious health challenges remain. Life expectancy at birth increased from about 67 to 71 years since 1990 but remains lower than in the US (77). Although maternal mortality fell from 272 deaths per 100,000 live births to 72 between 1990-2020, it remains CENTAM's fourth highest rate after Nicaragua (78), Guatemala (96), and Belize (130), but is lower than the Latin American and Caribbean average (74) and significantly higher than the US rate (21).



Meanwhile, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) decreased from 45 to 14 deaths per 1,000 live births between 1990-2022, yet it also remains higher than the US rate (5). Hondurans are also vulnerable to chronic, non-communicable diseases and outbreaks of communicable diseases spread by mosquitos or caused by parasites and bacteria.

### Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Traditional Honduran medicine centers on the use of herbal remedies to identify and treat illness and disease. Many Hondurans supplement modern medicine with traditional

therapies. Some communities that lack access to modern medicine rely entirely on traditional remedies to treat ailments ranging from minor ailments like headaches and skin infections to chronic illnesses



such as diabetes, respiratory disorders, and cancers.

Besides relying on herbal cures, some members of indigenous communities consult traditional healers to address specific physical illnesses and spiritual afflictions. For example, Garifuna (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*) may ask a **buyei** (healer) to communicate with **gubida** (spirits of deceased ancestors) and perform certain rituals to dispel sickness or cleanse the body of curses or spells (see p. 6 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

### Modern Healthcare System

The government offers free, universal healthcare to all Hondurans through a network of public hospitals and clinics. These facilities provide preventative and curative care such as maternal and pediatric services, dental treatments, emergency

services, and long-term care associated with major illnesses like cancer, cardiovascular diseases, and HIV/AIDS. In recent years, the government has sought to expand access and quality of care for poor, indigenous, and vulnerable populations. For example, a 2013 policy established specialized mobile units comprised of a physician and several nurses to deliver basic healthcare to isolated areas, Hondurans living in extreme poverty, and victims of violence and natural disasters.

Nevertheless, the healthcare system is plagued by widespread corruption and weak governance (see p. 2-3 of *Political and Social Relations*), often result in poor hospital management and a lack of coordination between healthcare institutions. Moreover, public hospitals are severely underfunded, ill-equipped, and understaffed. According to recent estimates, Honduras has only about 5 physicians per 10,000 people, notably lower than both

the World Health Organization's recommendation of 23 and rates in neighboring El Salvador (29) and Guatemala (13). Some experts predict this ratio may deteriorate in the future. Physicians are



severely underpaid, and healthcare workers increasingly emigrate to the US, Mexico, and elsewhere in CENTAM to seek employment opportunities or to flee regional violence (see p. 9 of *Political and Social Relations*).

Quality of care declines significantly in rural areas, where small clinics or mobile units deliver limited, basic services. As a result, many rural residents are forced to travel long distances over difficult terrain to reach urban medical centers for services like surgery and long-term care. Overall, observers estimate that some 18% of the Honduran population lacks access to modern medicine entirely. Private medical facilities offer higher quality of care but are limited to Hondurans who have private insurance or can afford the high out-of-pocket costs.

## Common Diseases

The leading causes of illness and death in Honduras are chronic and non-communicable “lifestyle” diseases such as diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, which together accounted for 71% of all deaths in 2019. Meanwhile, preventable “external causes,” such as suicides, car accidents, and other injuries resulted in about 18% of all deaths. Elevated by incidences of interpersonal violence (see below), this rate is

one of CENTAM's highest and is significantly higher than in the US (7%). Widespread poverty and inadequate maternal and neonatal care result in high rates of child malnutrition with some 7% of children under 5



underweight – a significantly higher rate than in the US (0.4%) and higher the Latin American and Caribbean average (2.8%).

Communicable diseases, such as bacterial diarrhea, malaria, dengue fever, tuberculosis, and hepatitis caused 11% of all deaths in 2019. Such diseases disproportionately affect rural residents, who often lack access to modern sanitation facilities and clean water and consequently experience a greater risk of infection from food or waterborne parasites and bacteria. Since 2016, Hondurans are also at risk of exposure to the Zika virus. Transmitted by mosquitos, the virus can cause birth defects in unborn children. Frequent natural disasters (see p. 3 of *Political and Social Relations*) intermittently result in shortages of potable water, food, and medicine and worsen disease outbreaks. Some 22,000 Hondurans or 0.2% of the population live with HIV/AIDS.

## Interpersonal Violence

Stemming from ongoing gang-related conflict (see p. 9 of *Political and Social Relations*), interpersonal violence contributes to high death rates. In 2015, 20% of Hondurans reported that they or a family member had experienced a violent crime such as murder, maiming, and the sexual exploitation of women and children (see p. 2-3 of *Sex and Gender*).

## 11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

### Overview

For centuries, regional inhabitants engaged in agriculture and long-distance trade in foodstuffs like corn and cacao, textiles, ceramics, feathers, and precious metals (see p. 1-2 of *History and Myth*). Following their 16th-century colonization of the region, the Spanish initially focused on gold and silver mining, using enslaved indigenous people for the dangerous work (see p. 4 of *History and Myth*).

Mining hit its peak halfway through the 16th century, then slowly declined in importance, leaving cattle-raising and subsistence farming as the region's main economic activities. The mining industry was revived somewhat in the late 19th century, when the government gave US companies preferential access to

deposits (see p. 7 of *History and Myth*). In the 1890s, silver and gold bullion constituted some 75% of Honduran exports.



In the early 20th century, the Standard Fruit and Steamship Company (later Dole Food Company), the United Fruit Company

(later Chiquita Brands International), and the Cuyamel Fruit Company began shipping bananas from Honduras to the US, quickly leading to a banana boom. By 1930, Honduras had earned its title as a “Banana Republic” (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*), producing 1/3 of the world's supply of bananas. The fruit companies acquired significant economic and political influence and built much-needed infrastructure yet helped to widen economic inequalities by pushing local farmers out of the fruit business. In 1954, a landmark strike by banana workers demanding better working conditions brought fruit production to a standstill and resulted in fundamental labor reforms that were unprecedented in CENTAM (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*).

In the 1950s-60s, the Honduran economy began to diversify, with a significant increase in exports of coffee, beef, and cotton. Honduras also deepened economic ties with its neighbors, seeking regional economic integration through the Central American Common Market (or CACM – see p. 10 of *History and Myth*), a trade bloc encompassing Honduras, Costa Rica, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Honduras withdrew from the CACM following the 1969 Soccer War (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*), though it rejoined in the early 1990s.

Facing severe economic challenges beginning in the 1980s (see p. 12 of *History and Myth*), Honduras relied on foreign aid for about 4.6% of its GDP. Nevertheless, the economy failed to grow, and unemployment doubled in just a few years. Around the same time, Honduras encouraged the light manufacturing industry through the development of **maquilas** or **maquiladoras**, primarily Asian-owned export-oriented assembly factories operating in free trade zones.

By 1997, *maquilas* employed some 75,000 Hondurans but had forced many small manufacturing firms out of business. Despite this industrial growth, agriculture remained central to the Honduran economy. Consequently, the economy suffered enormously when Hurricane Mitch destroyed most of the country's crops and transportation infrastructure in 1998 (see p. 3 of *Political and Social Relations*). Experts estimate that the overall damage from the hurricane represented over 2/3 of the country's GDP.



In 2006, new laws doubled the minimum wage yet resulted in widespread layoffs. The same year, Honduras joined the Dominican Republic–Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), a trade bloc comprising the US, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic. CAFTA-DR benefitted large agricultural exporters by liberalizing trade in goods and services but also caused hardship

to the poor, who saw the price of staples rise rapidly. Through CAFTA-DR, US foreign direct investment in Honduras increased 71%, totaling \$1.4 billion in 2017.

Recently, the government has sought to stimulate economic growth through additional foreign investment. For example, the “Honduras 20/20” plan aims to attract \$13 billion in investment and generate some 600,000 jobs. The proposed “Employment and Economic Development Zones” would comprise special free trade territories governed by private investors with the aim of increasing foreign direct investment by \$400 million. Nevertheless, observers criticize the zones’ lack of public oversight and likely will not bring real benefits.

Today, Honduras is the region’s 6th largest economy out of 7 countries in CENTAM ahead of Nicaragua. It also has the region’s lowest GDP per capita. Distribution of wealth remains unequal, As of April 2024 over 59% of the population living below the national poverty line. Recently, GDP growth has been positive, reaching 12.5% in 2021 and exceeding expectations, mainly due to exports, investment, and remittances from Hondurans living abroad. Remittances comprised 27% of GDP in 2022. In 2022, GDP growth was 4%.

Honduras’ economic outlook is favorable, with experts expecting GDP to grow 3.5% in 2023. Nevertheless, Honduras faces several challenges. Due to its dependence on a few commodities, namely bananas and coffee, it remains vulnerable to global commodity price shocks. Further, Honduras’ workforce remains largely low-skilled and undereducated (see p. 3-5 of *Learning and Knowledge*). Finally, the violent activities of Honduras’ criminal gangs (see p. 9 of *Political and Social Relations*) deter business investment, and by some estimates,

cost the Honduran economy up to 10% of its GDP annually.

### Services

Accounting for about 56% of GDP and 52% of employment, services is Honduras’s largest economic sector, comprising





travel and transportation, retail, financial services, and telecommunications.

**Tourism:** Due to COVID, tourism decreased to 669,000 visitors spending \$189,000 in 2020, a 66% decrease from 2019. However, the number of tourist arrivals increased 11% in 2022. Honduras has several notable attractions, including the Maya site of Copán (see p. 2 of *History and Myth*) and coral reefs off the Bay Islands.



**Call Centers:** As of 2023, call centers have generated over 17,000 jobs in Honduras and appear poised for additional growth.

### Industry

Comprising 26% of GDP and 23% of employment,

the industrial sector is primarily made up of light manufacturing and *maquilas* that produce textiles and apparel (see p. 1 of *Sex and Gender*).

**Manufacturing:** Manufacturing makes up about 15% of Honduras' GDP and primarily focuses on food products, beverages, textiles, clothing, chemicals, lumber, and paper products.

**Mining:** Mining, especially of gold and zinc, is a small but important subsector, comprising some 0.4% of GDP in 2021 and 4% of the country's exports.

### Agriculture

The agricultural sector consists of farming, livestock, fishing, and forestry. Once the backbone of Honduras' economy, agriculture accounted for just 13% of GDP and 25% of the labor force in 2022.

**Farming:** Due to its mountainous terrain, only 9% of Honduras' land was suitable for farming as of 2020. In the highlands, most agriculture occurs on small-scale subsistence farms producing coffee, citrus fruit, maize, beans, or other vegetables. There are some large-scale farms that produce beef, melons, sugarcane,

and coffee for export. The lowlands are dominated by banana plantations. In 2011, Honduras surpassed Guatemala as CENTAM's largest coffee producer. The coffee industry is a key component of the economy, and as of 2022, made up some 5% of GDP and employed about 1 million Honduran workers.

**Fishing:** Honduras is one of the region's main exporters of shrimp, tilapia, and lobster, generating more than \$360 million in 2022.

### Currency

The currency of Honduras is the **lempira** (L) (see p. 3 of *History and Myth*), issued in 8 banknotes (1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, 500). The **lempira** subdivides into 100 **centavos** (cents), issued in 6 coins (1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50), though 20 and 50 cent coins are the most widely used. \$1 was worth about L25.30 in late-2024.



### Foreign Trade

Honduras' exports, totaling \$12.3 billion in 2022, primarily consisted of apparel, coffee, shrimp, automobile wire harnesses, cigars, bananas, gold, palm oil, citrus fruit, lobster, and lumber delivered to the US (51%), Nicaragua (8%), El Salvador (8%), Guatemala (5%), Germany (4%), and Mexico (4%). In the same year, Honduras imported \$16 billion of refined petroleum, textiles, packaged medicaments, electronic equipment, and automobiles from the US (47%), Guatemala (10%), China (10%), El Salvador (7%), Mexico (4%), and Costa Rica (3%).

### Foreign Aid

The US has historically been Honduras' largest donor, though then-US President Trump suspended all aid to Honduras in mid-2019. In late 2019, the US resumed assistance to Honduras after the two countries signed an immigration deal (see p. 11 of *Political and Social Relations*). In 2022, the US is provided \$170 million in foreign aid. The European Union is also a significant contributor of aid to Honduras, providing an annual average of \$56 million in 2020-2021.

## 12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

### Overview

Hondurans have access to an extensive physical infrastructure network and modern telecommunications. While free speech and press are constitutionally protected, those freedoms are occasionally restricted.

### Transportation

The most common forms of transportation are foot, motorcycle, bicycle, **camionetas** (private buses), **micros** or **rapiditos** (smaller vans), taxis, and mototaxis. Few Hondurans have a privately-owned vehicle.

Buses provide transportation between urban areas, with most routes passing



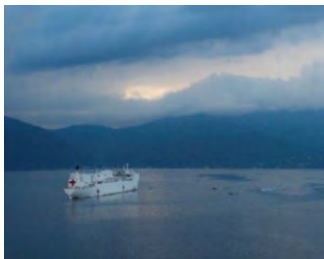
through the northern city of San Pedro Sula. Several classes of buses offer service: refurbished American school buses without assigned seating that make frequent stops; "Pullman" or **Especial** (Special), coach-style buses with infrequent stops; and **Primera Clase** (First Class) air-conditioned luxury models with restrooms, television, and food service. City buses are often targeted by gang members, especially in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa and therefore a dangerous form of transport.

### Roadways

Of Honduras' 9,200 mi of roads, some 23% are paved. The **Carretera Panamericana** (Pan-American Highway), a major CENTAM transportation artery, passes through Honduras for some 100 miles. Within the country, a major highway connects the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, passing through San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa. Other primary roadways link San Pedro Sula and Copán, as well as cities along the northern coast.

## Railways

Honduras has about 430 mi of railway developed in the 19th-20th centuries by fruit companies (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*). Today, the Honduras National Railway operates in Puerto Cortés and San Pedro Sula, while the Tela Railway, headquartered in La Lima, offers service in the northwest. Both lines transport passengers and freight. Chinese investors have expressed interest in creating a railway linking the Caribbean and the Pacific coasts, though as of mid-2024 no concrete plans have materialized.



## Ports and Waterways

Honduras has about 290 mi of navigable waterways, though most are only traversable by smaller boats. Honduras has 4 major ports: La Ceiba,

Puerto Cortés, and Tela on the Caribbean coast and San Lorenzo on the Pacific. Puerto Cortés is Honduras' largest and CENTAM's second largest port.

## Airways

Of Honduras' 129 airports, 13 have paved runways. The primary air transport hubs are Ramón Villeda Morales (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*) International Airport near San Pedro Sula and Toncontín International Airport in Tegucigalpa. Airports in the tourist center of Roatán (Bay Islands) and in Honduras' third-largest city of La Ceiba primarily handle regional flights. Some 1.8 million passengers traveled through Honduran airports in 2022.

## Energy

In 2022, Honduras generated 37% of its electricity from fossil fuels, 33% from hydroelectric plants, and 17% from other renewable sources. With no domestic oil industry, Honduras must import its fossil fuels. The government has invested in infrastructure to diversify energy usage and aims to increase renewable energy production to about 80% of its electricity needs by 2038.

## Media

The government generally respects media rights, although journalists tend to self-censor to avoid violence from gangs (see p. 9 of *Political and Social Relations*) and government officials who object to their reporting. Some 45 journalists and media workers were killed between 2010-21.



Further, just a handful of owners controls Honduran media outlets, effectively restricting press freedoms. Since the 2009 coup (see p. 13 of *History and Myth*), the media environment has become increasingly restrictive.

**Print Media:** Honduras' largest Spanish-language newspapers are *El Heraldo*, *La Prensa*, and *La Tribuna*. *Honduras This Week* is the primary English language weekly. Most newspapers are linked to political or business interests.

**Radio and TV:** Radio is popular in Honduras, with over 1,000 private stations such as *HRN* and *Radio Globo Honduras* operating alongside the government-operated *Radio Nacional de Honduras*. Some 400 public and private television channels operate in Honduras, though many are regionally-based, and most residents have access to far fewer.

## Telecommunications

Penetration rates for Honduras' modern telecommunications infrastructure tend to be lower in rural areas. In 2022, Honduras had some 4 landlines and 76 mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 people.

**Internet:** Some 48% of Hondurans regularly used the Internet in 2021. Generally, government authorities neither restrict access nor block or censor content, though some observers claim the government monitors some private communications.



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