Stealing Babies, Making Families: Does Corruption in Government lead to More Adoptions into the US?

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Introduction
On March 26, 2007 Ana Escobar reported her baby Esther Zulamita was stolen. Ana was locked in a storage closet at the family’s shoe store, north of Guatemala City, while armed men took her daughter. Two months later, Ana was sitting in the National Adoption Council’s offices when she spotted her baby. Esther was being adopted by an unidentified US couple. DNA tests had been falsified and Esther was given all new papers. Convinced that the child was hers, Ana got a new DNA test ordered. These tests confirmed that the baby was Esther and she has since been reunited with her mother. Unfortunately, stories like these are all too familiar in Central and South America.

Methods/Findings
For this study, we created a data set containing all of the sending countries for adoption into the US. In this study, we focused specifically on countries located in Central and South America. We ran a regression testing the association between the sending countries’ corruption and adoptions into the US. This model shows that there is a positive association between corrupt governments and the number of children adopted into the US. For every one unit increase in the corruption of a government, there is a 34.24 unit increase in adoption to the US. The p-value for this model is 0.033, suggesting that this is a statistically significant finding. Finally, 55% of the variance in adoptions to the US by Central and South American countries is accounted for by this model.

Recommendations
• It should be required that birth mothers personally verify they still want to give up their children before the adoption becomes final.
• It should be required that both mother and child be present at all court hearings.
• Further, the government should do everything in its power to document all children.
• Corruption needs to be of international concern and other countries need to do their part in ending governmental corruption. As was the case with Guatemala, other countries need to ban adoptions from countries suspected of corruption and unethical adoption practices.

Sending Countries’ Contributing Factors
• 80% of people in Guatemala live below the poverty line
• In most Central and South American countries have very little access to contraception
• Since 1900 there have been 15 major wars and several other minor conflicts in the region.
• The longer a child spends in an institutional setting, the harder it is for a child to overcome the associated negative effects (lower IQ, attachment issues, malnutrition, delayed development).

Receiving Countries’ Contributing Factors
• Decreases stigma attached to single parenting has lead to fewer babies available for adoption in the US.
• Delayed childbearing has lead to decreased fertility in US women and increases demand for foreign babies.
• The total fertility rate in the US after WWII peaked at 3.8 children per women in the late 1950s, and by 1999 was at 2 children.

Case Study
One in every 100 babies born in Guatemala is adopted by a US family, representing the third largest exporter of children into the US. There corruption rating in 122, the seventh worst out of sixty countries that send children to the US.

“When I got out my baby was gone”