

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Displacements

The displacement of peoples fleeing violence and extreme poverty in their home countries is among the most pressing issues around the globe. Some of the most telling examples are taking place in Latin America, where the United Nations and Doctors Without Borders calculate an estimated 500,000 people flee Central America for Mexico and the United States each year, and roughly 3 million people have left Venezuela since 2014.

Annually, Spain and Portugal receive thousands of refugees from conflict-ravaged regions in Africa and the Middle East. The situation impacts local communities, national politics and transnational relations. It also has fostered political extremism, exploitation and organized crime. Scholars argue climate change will aggravate the problem in coming decades, as land and resources become scarcer.

A two-day academic conference at UC Santa Barbara, “Displacements: People, Politics and Rights in Latin America and the Iberian World,” brings together undergraduate students from California to discuss themes of displacement, broadly understood: the displacement of peoples, but also of cultures, objects and ideas.

The keynote will be delivered by Terry Lynn Karl, the emerita Gildred Professor of Political Science and Latin American Studies at Stanford University. She will speak on “Massacres, Migration, and the Promise of Change”

The conference, slated for Wednesday and Thursday, April 10 and 11, in the University Center’s Harbor Room, will begin at 8:30 a.m. Karl’s lecture will take place

April 10 at 4 p.m. All events are free and open to the public.

The campus's Latin American and Iberian Studies Program (LAIS) "is committed to fostering discussions on themes that are relevant today and that touch the lives of real people," noted Cecilia Méndez, program director and a professor of history. "We think it's important to blur the boundary between academia and 'the world out there.' The world out there, in our case, is also a world within because many of our students are here due to a history of displacements, not only from Latin America, but also from many other places worldwide.

"Today," she continued, "when anti-immigrant rhetoric has taken hold of the present administration and the president is obsessed with building walls — a situation that is replicated in many other wealthy nations — the topic of displacement seemed pertinent. However, as some of the conference papers will show, the U.S. is far from being the only country where immigrants from Latin America are trying to get in. Forced displacement is rampant within Latin America."

To wit, Méndez noted, "A humanitarian crisis in Venezuela has driven millions of Venezuelans to Colombia, Peru and Brazil, creating explosive situations at the borders. Mexico has become home for Central Americans escaping gang violence and poverty." Both Chile and Brazil, she added, are receiving great numbers of impoverished Haitians.

The conference presentations have been grouped into six panels organized around particular themes: "Indigenous and Colonial Histories," "Power, Media, and Foreign Policy," "Feminisms and Gender," "Education and Indigenous Languages," "Environment, Women, and Health," and "Migration, Borders, and Human Trafficking." Collectively, according to Méndez, they deal with the question of displacements not only in connection to the physical displacement of people, but also the displacement of languages, the loss of social status, and racism that often are part of the migration experience.

"On the other hand, the conference highlights the question of human rights and activism," she said. "Our keynote speaker was chosen precisely because her career combines academic excellence with public service and activism. Her trajectory as a human rights advocate and expert witness in court cases of human rights abuses includes helping hundreds of refugees gain asylum."

The conference, which showcases the work of undergraduates at UC Santa Barbara, not only helps them get an earlier start on their careers, it also helps create a community within the different areas of study here on campus and between UC Santa Barbara and other institutions. Among undergraduates participating are students from UCLA, UC Riverside and the University of Southern California.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.