

Covid-19 and (Im)mobility in the Americas

MÉXICO

1. **Poverty rate:** 42% out of the total population.¹
2. **Migration data**
 - a. Sending country: around 12 million Mexicans or 9.5% of the total population reside abroad mainly in the US (97.4%), Canada (0.73%) and Spain (0.45%).
 - b. Destination country: around 1 million immigrants or 0.85% of the total population live in Mexico. The main countries of origin are the US (71.87%), Guatemala (4.16%) and Spain (2.22%).
 - c. Transit country: Due to its geographic location Mexico has been a country of transit for irregularized migrants en route to the US who originate, mostly from Central America, but also from South America, the Caribbean, and African, Asian, and the Middle Eastern countries. In particular, the southern states of Mexico are important transit areas for irregularized migrants. Mexican authorities estimate that some 150,000 migrants pass through its territory annually.
 - d. Host country for refugees: In 2017, 14,596 people sought asylum in Mexico (29% from Honduras, 27% from Venezuela, 25% from El Salvador. In 2019, a record number of asylum applications was reached, reporting 70,709 asylum seekers.³
3. **Impact by COVID-19⁴ (as of July 14, 2020)**
 - a. Registered cases: 304,435
 - b. % of cases out of the total population: 0.23%
 - c. Number of deaths: 35,491
4. **State Measures**
 - Border closures and increasing border surveillance.
 - Increased cooperation between Mexico and the US in migration and border control issues during the pandemic.

¹<https://www.animalpolitico.com/2019/08/pobreza-mexico-reduccion-anos-chiapas-guerrero-oaxaca-veracruz/>

²<https://fnst.org/content/mexico-pais-de-transito-retorno-y-destino-de-migrantes>

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³https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/290340/ESTADISTICAS_2013_A_4TO_TRIMESTRE_2017.pdf

<https://www.gob.mx/comar/articulos/estadistica-mayo-2020?idiom=es>

⁴ John Hopkins University (2020). "Coronavirus Resource Centre". <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

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- About 27,000 Mexican soldiers have been sent to border areas. The US has sent more than 5,000 US soldiers and 540 additional troops to the US-Mexico border in order to reinforce immigration control by the Border Patrol.
- In the face of the national health emergency established by the US, which closed the border and stopped ongoing migration processes, including the right to seek asylum, and under the "Remain in Mexico" policy, the Mexican government agreed to:
 - o Accept returned Mexicans and thousands of Central Americans who stay at the northern border waiting for their asylum application process to resume.
 - o Assist thousands of Central Americans, who are waiting and in legal limbo, providing facilities in existing infrastructure such as shelters located throughout the border strip or refugee camps such as the one in Matamoros, Tamaulipas.
 - o Receive Mexicans deported from the US, especially the ones who are tested and identified for COVID-19 upon arrival, and help them return to their communities of origin by land with the support of the National Institute of Migration (INM).
 - o Assist thousands of deported children and adolescents placed in detention centers.
 - o Create a program called the Federal Government's Integral Center for Attention to Migrants in Tijuana. This is a maquiladora ship in an industrial park with the capacity to receive up to 3,000 people whose asylum hearing in the US was postponed or Mexican returnees.
- The temporary stay permit obtained through the Multiple Immigration Form was temporarily suspended by the INM. This measure produces the irregularization of migrants and exacerbates the possibility of deportation.
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SRE) considers the proposal to grant regular status to migrants from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala to minimize crowding in detention centers.
- Deadlines, terms and activities of the Ministry of the Interior (SEGOB) are suspended, including the refugee status determination processes, until May 1.
 - o In April, asylum applications plummeted by 90% in Mexico.
- The Mexican Commission for Aid to Refugees (under SEGOB) continues to receive applications for asylum and has provided guidelines to asylum seekers and refugees on social distancing, self-quarantine, and access to health centres.
- UNHCR Mexico suspended the relocation program temporarily.
- Migrant shelters operated by the federal government and civil society were at great risk of contagion because they were at their full capacity:
 - o Health services at the national level are in contact with migrant shelters to identify cases of Covid-19.
- The 32 detention centres and the 26 temporary detention centres are overcrowded, and no measures have been taken to protect detainees:
 - o There have been no tests for COVID-19.
 - o The number of emergency shelters has not increased.
 - o There is a focus of contagion and life risk for migrant detainees.
 - o Detainees have organized protests in the detention centres in Chiapas, Tabasco, Sonora and Coahuila.
 - o When one person was killed in a fire during the protest in Tabasco, the INM stated that it had acted peacefully and blamed it on the people who protested. By contrast, testimonies provided by detainees indicate that INM and National

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Guard agents did not allow them to leave the burning building. This action resulted in the death of one protestor.

- Due to social pressure, at the end of April, almost all of the migrants detained in detention centres were released. They were mostly Central Americans.
 - o An agreement with the countries of the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), and with the support of the IOM and UNHCR made it possible for many detainees to return to their country of origin. However, it is not clear whether these returns were voluntary, and whether there were asylum seekers among those who had returned.
 - o The INM and SRE achieved the return of 3,600 migrants by land to Guatemala and by air to Honduras and El Salvador. Among them were girls, boys, adolescents, elderly, families, pregnant women and people with chronic diseases.
- There have been recorded cases of arbitrary detentions by municipal, state and/or federal police, agents that have no legal authority to detain migrants.
- So far, the only explicit measure to support Mexican migrants abroad has been SRE's assistance in transferring, embalming or cremating deceased people.

5. High risk situations / at risk populations:

- ▶ Between the establishment of national health emergency and early May, more than 10,000 people (including irregularized migrants, asylum seekers, women, children, and adolescents) were deported from the USA to Mexico
- ▶ The Mexico-US border areas have become an area of confinement, protracted waiting, legal limbo and extremely insecure living conditions.
- ▶ There are many urban areas around shelters in Tijuana, Ciudad Juarez, Piedras Negras that work as the ad hoc refugee camp in Matamoros. They are full of irregularized migrants in transit, deportees, returnees and asylum seekers.
- ▶ Among the nearly 60,000 people stranded at the northern border waiting for their asylum resolution from the US government, there are at least 17,000 children who are especially vulnerable to violence and/or to COVID-19.
- *Irregularized migrants in transit, mainly Central Americans but also from South American, Caribbean, Asian and African countries (this population is extremely vulnerable to COVID-19)*
 - o Before the pandemic:
 - Irregularized migrants in transit lived under constant threat of deportation and detention and had limited access to health services.
 - They experience extremely precarious living conditions, working in the informal labour market where they are exploited and have no social protections.
 - They were the target of abuse and of multiple kinds of violence along the way.

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- **The situation for irregularized migrants has NOT changed during the pandemic. Risks have possibly been exacerbated, which directly affects the lives of irregularized migrants in Mexico.**
- During the pandemic:
 - Although irregularized migrants continue to arrive, their numbers have decreased from 1,000 to 600 daily. The vast majority of irregularized migrants have no opportunities to socially distance themselves or self-isolate at home.
 - Those who still have jobs work in the informal labour market with no health benefits. Their income has been reduced considerably. There are serious concerns about rent payment and the possibility of becoming homeless.
 - There are many migrants living on the streets throughout the country, but especially at the border, where they are highly vulnerable to COVID-19.
 - Despite the pandemic, the arrival of irregularized migrants from Central America, Cuba, Venezuela, and to a lesser extent from Haiti and African countries continues.
 - Irregularized migrants in transit are sent back to Guatemala where they are detained by Guatemalan immigration authorities in what appears as a revolving door of control.
- *Detained Irregularized migrants* (this population is extremely vulnerable to COVID-19)
 - Before the pandemic:
 - Hygienic and sanitary conditions in detention centers were already poor due to overcrowding, extreme heat, and lack of ventilation. This posed a de facto risk for detained irregularized migrants.
 - During the pandemic:
 - Detained irregularized migrants at various detention centres organized hunger strikes and protests. They burned mattresses to demand release and repatriation in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak.
 - At the “Siglo XXI” detention centre in Tapachula, detained irregularized migrants were gassed and beaten in the middle of the protest. Around 14 migrants were able to escape. At the Tenosique detention centre, one person died at the protest.
- *Asylum seekers at the Northern border* (legal limbo/protracted waiting/stranded in the middle of ad hoc refugee camps. This population is extremely vulnerable to COVID-19)
 - Before the pandemic:
 - Asylum seekers at the Northern border experience extremely precarious living conditions where they only have access to informal work niches, are exploited and have no social protection nor access to health services.
 - They were the target of abuse and of multiple kinds of violence along the way.

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- **The situation for asylum seekers has NOT changed during the pandemic. Risks have possibly been exacerbated, which directly affects the lives of protracted waiting asylum seekers in Mexico.**
- During the pandemic:
 - Due to the border closure and the suspension of asylum application processes in the US, around 2,000 migrants are stranded in the refugee camp located in Matamoros, Tamaulipas.
 - The waiting means living in overcrowded and confined conditions, in tents with limited medical supplies, and unsanitary conditions. This situation poses a high risk of COVID-19 contagion.
 - This refugee camp was gradually configured as part of the "Remain in Mexico" policy, under which asylum seekers in the US remained on the Mexican side of the border until their asylum determination process was resolved by the US authority.
 - Due to the pandemic, the waiting time and the legal limbo have increased, as well as the precariousness of their daily lives.
 - Indigenous people from Guerrero and the Highlands of Chiapas who were seeking asylum in the US, returned to their communities of origin when they saw the overcrowded and precarious conditions that exist in the Tamaulipas' camps.
 - Given the extremely vulnerable situation in the refugee camp, the Governor of Tamaulipas and the heads of SEGOB and the SRE held a virtual meeting where the governor insisted on the need to address the situation of migrants who are stranded at the border with the US. The SRE assured that there will be measures taking place in this matter.
- *Mexican deportees* (this population is extremely vulnerable to COVID-19)
 - Before the pandemic:
 - Mexican deportees were detained and sent back by land in handcuffs.
 - During the pandemic:
 - The US does not respect previously established agreements of the deportation of Mexicans. The schedules and notices of deportations are breached, and some deported persons may be infected. Most deportations are done at dawn, without deploying international or health protocols.
 - The US has implemented 96-minute express deportations. Between March 1 to 18, 13,000 people were deported. In February 12,400 people had been deported.
 - In Ciudad Juárez, a shelter is being prepared to receive Mexican deportees from El Paso, Texas, to keep them isolated and prevent them from spreading COVID-19.
 - Deportees are received in Mexico without any measures to check if they are infected with COVID-19.
- *Central American or other origin deportees* (this population is extremely vulnerable to COVID-19)

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- Before the pandemic
 - Central American deportees were detained by US immigration authorities and sent back in handcuffs to Mexico by land. Migrant authorities handcuff and send them to Guatemala.
 - During the pandemic:
 - The new protocols put into effect on March 20 allow the express deportation to Mexico in an average of 96 minutes. This process previously could take hours or days, depending on the time taken to fill the reports at the Border Patrol facilities and to verify the state of health of the detained person.
 - More than 480 migrants from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador who had previously been returned from the US were abandoned by the INM at the Talisman Mexican border with Guatemala. However, Guatemalan migration authorities prevented the entrance of the buses, which left them trapped between the two borders. It was noted that some irregularized migrants managed to get off from the bus and continued their route to countries of origin. Some National Guard officials “recaptured” the rest.
- *Migrant Childhood and Adolescence* (this population is extremely vulnerable to Covid-19)
- Before the pandemic:
 - Children and Adolescents from Latin America, particularly from Mexico and Central American countries, travel alone or with a companion (such as a family member) through Mexico to the US border. Their goal is to reunite with their relatives who live in that country or to look for a better life.
 - These children and adolescents were already exposed to:
 - Family separation.
 - Detentions in detention centres.
 - Violations of due process by migration authorities in the US and Mexico.
 - Violations of their right to asylum and international protection.
 - Deportations despite conditions of violence in their communities of origin.
 - Experiences of various forms of physical/sexual/psychological violence, human trafficking, and being recruited by criminal actors operating at the border.
 - Hunger and cold.
 - Denial of access to education, health, or special protection services.
 - In 2017, there were 8,877 cases of unaccompanied Mexican children and adolescents detained by the Border Patrol in the US side.
 - A total of 16,162 Central American children (particularly from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) were repatriated from Mexico to their countries of origin. The majority were traveling unaccompanied.

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- **The situation for children and adolescents has NOT changed during the pandemic. Risks have been exacerbated, which directly affects the lives of migrant children and adolescents in Mexico.**
- During the pandemic:
 - Mexican and Central American migrant children and adolescents have been severely affected by the closure of shelters, the interruption of donation and supply chains, the interruption of volunteer activities and the suspension of activities of organizations and support networks in the context of the COVID-19 contingency.
 - Many of the few shelters that are still open and providing care have overcrowded conditions and not all of them have the spaces and/or trained personnel to assist children and adolescents.
 - Mexican and Central American children seeking to migrate or requesting asylum in the US are among the most vulnerable groups. Many are trapped in a legal limbo that exposes them to situations of violence at the Northern border of Mexico or of possible COVID-19 contagion.
 - Among the nearly 60,000 people who are today awaiting their asylum resolution by the US authorities at the Mexican side, there are at least 17,000 boys and girls.
 - Since April and under the new exceptional US immigration regulations and the deployment of the express deportation process, 400 migrant children have been intercepted at the border every two weeks and have been deported to Mexico.
 - Within the migratory stations of Mexico, children and adolescents have not only been exposed to contagion due to overcrowding, but also their lives have been put at risk due to the riots that have occurred.

6. Social Responses

- *Migrant struggles:*
 - Migrants went to the National Human Rights Commission to demand protection and prevent them from being deported by the INM.
 - Protests have taken place inside detention centers in Chiapas, Tabasco, Sonora and Coahuila, where people demanded their release at the risk of COVID-19 contagion. In the protest registered at the “Siglo XXI” detention centre in Tapachula, civil society organizations denounced torture and cruel and degrading treatment by the National Guard and the Federal Police when they intervened. In the detention centre in Tabasco an asylum-seeker died when fire got out of control.
 - Migrant detainees go on hunger strike and protests demanding to be released In Tamaulipas, at the shores of the Rio Grande, migrants have created makeshift rooms for people who have been expelled or are awaiting decisions on their asylum claim.
- *Solidarity Networks:*

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- Organizations that defend the rights of migrants demand to:
 - Implement hygiene and sanitary measures to safeguard the health of migrants in migratory stations -detention centers-, and shelters.
 - Initiate information campaigns in various formats about how to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
 - Cease detention of migrants, and release migrants that are already detained in detention centres and temporary centres.
 - Protection of homeless migrants and actions against xenophobia and discrimination.
- Multiple solidarity networks at the national level (made up of grassroots organizations, feminists, independent journalists, and human rights NGOs) have created and written alerts and petitions directed at the Mexican government demanding protection and respect of rights of people on the move, particularly of migrant children and adolescents.
- Shelters run by the Catholic Church and civil society in Baja California, Tamaulipas, Coahuila and Chiapas cannot receive more irregularized migrants in transit. They are at full capacity, do not have adequate facilities, and they are at a point of high contagion for COVID-19. They denounce that the government has not offered any support to the shelters where asylum seekers are waiting in overcrowded conditions. They demand from the government protocols for the care of migrants during the health emergency.
- Binational activism:
 - Activists from El Otro Lado (work in Los Angeles, California and Baja California) and from the American Immigration Council denounce that local police harass migrants in the US, and then turn them over to INM officers in Mexico to be detained and deported from there.
 - Faith in Action Coalition (Catholic Relief Services, Bishop Mark J. Seitz of the Diocese of El Paso; La 72, Hogar - Refuge for Migrants (Mexico), Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (Honduras), Justice, Peace and Integrity of the Creation / Honduras, Sentinels for the Dignification of the State (Guatemala), Organized Faith Communities in Action (El Salvador), Congregation Action Network (Washington, DC), and New Mexico CAFé have generated a petition for the protection of migrant rights (<https://www.krwg.org/post/immigrant-rights-groups-calling-migrant-and-refugee-protection-during-covid-19-pandemic>).
- The Red Cross Committee for Mexico and Central America launched a campaign "Humanity that relieves" in order to demand health services for migrants exposed to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- In support of migrant shelters, UNICEF sent hygiene kits for children and adults, mainly women and their relatives. The kit will be distributed in 26 shelters in Tapachula, Chiapas, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua and Tijuana and Mexicali, Baja California.

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*For more detail go to the digital archive that we created:

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