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## Should I Stay or Should I Go: The Impact of Crossing Migrants in local communities in Mexico

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Whittier Scholars Program Senior Project

“Should I Stay or Should I Go: The Impact of Crossing Migrants in local communities in  
Mexico”

## **Abstract**

The interactions between migrants and Mexican local communities have positive and negative outcomes. A report by Human Rights First found that more than 630 violent crimes against asylum seekers were reported in the first few months of the “Remain in Mexico” policy. Still, some migrants have been able to assimilate and stay in Mexico, particularly in large cities such as Tijuana, Baja California and Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua. This research project combines qualitative data collected through interviews with local NGOs between September 2020 to February 2021 and secondary research data. It focuses on the living conditions of migrants who have stayed in Mexico. Particularly, the study looks into the context that these migrants face when crossing, transiting, and establishing in local Mexican communities, either because they are in the process of waiting for their asylum seeking process to take place in the United States or because they decide to definitely stay in Mexico. In the project, I look at the effects of the “Remain in Mexico” policy and the new challenges migrants have faced since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, the project finds that migrants in Mexico are exposed to continuous violence, both from the state, from criminal groups, and even from groups that are in charge of their protection. This context increases the vulnerability of migrants and reduces their capacity to access resources that are already scarce. This situation got exacerbated after the start of the pandemic, with the closure of the Southern border. Further research will focus on the interaction between migrant groups and local communities and the violence that emerges from these exchanges.

## Introduction

Migration is a phenomenon that has been intertwined with humanity throughout history and has been a key factor in the transformation of global society. The UN Migration Agency (IOM) defines a migrant as “any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person’s legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is”. Historically, individuals have relied on migration either individually or in groups in order to flee from disease, conflict and war, poverty, religious persecution, or seek better living and financial conditions. Although individuals still make the decision to migrate based on the reasons mentioned above, as society has evolved so have the reasons for migration. Climate change, natural disasters, organized crime, corruption, internal political problems, human rights violations, as well as gender-based violence, among others, have been added to the list of push factors (Hernandez, 2014).

Although essential for development, migration has been a topic of ongoing debate among nations given the evolution of borders and politics. Questions regarding how to reduce undocumented migration and who is granted legal status in the country of destination have arisen during the past decades, especially in the current political and social climate. An example of this, one this research focuses on, is the “Remain in Mexico” policy officially known as *Migrant Protection Protocols*, put in place by the administrations of the U.S. President Donald Trump and Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador in January 2019. Although it was finally suspended by the Biden administration in August 2022, it impacted thousands of migrants and asylum seekers crossing through Mexico with the initial idea of arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border to enter the U.S.

According to the American Immigration Council, at least 70,000 migrants were returned to Mexico under the “Remain in Mexico” program. Migrants stranded in Mexican border cities such as Tijuana, Baja California and Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, cities which are known to experience alarming levels of violence due to organized crime, have been left vulnerable and experience high rates of violence and discrimination; with the COVID-19 pandemic adding an extra layer of challenges and uncertainty. The unknown waiting time and constraints to arrive at their country of destination as well as the health crisis inclined thousands of migrants to make the decision to request asylum in Mexico in order to establish there more permanently.

While the “Remain in Mexico” policy and its impact as well as the various ways migrants establishing in Mexico affect and are affected by local Mexican communities are discussed in the following sections, it must be noted that this is an ongoing phenomenon for which more research needs to be conducted; the impacts of this policy had and continues to go further than long waiting times. It has altered the lives of thousands of asylum seekers, and has had effects on local communities as well as in Mexico’s society as a whole.

Another key point covered in the following sections is the shift in configuration or diversification of migration. Migrants from many different parts of the world have embarked on the journey to migrate to North American countries, with the US being the most popular destination. This diversification is important because many of these migrants cross through Mexico with the hope to arrive at the US-Mexico border. However, many migrants from African, Asian, and the Caribbean have made the decision to also establish in Mexico due to the “Remain in Mexico” policy and Covid-19 pandemic. When addressing migrant experiences we must take this aspect into consideration because of how the diverse backgrounds and identities of migrants play a role in their interaction with local Mexican communities.

This article consists of three parts: the first establishes a foundation in order to understand the analysis presented here, by presenting a brief overview of the migratory phenomenon between Mexico and the US, the shift in configuration in migration to the US, and Mexico's role as a transit and host country of migrants, the 'Remain in Mexico' policy, and by describing which theoretical and methodological elements were used.

The second part is dedicated to exploring the interactions between migrants transiting and establishing in Mexico and local Mexican communities throughout different phases of their migratory process. It focuses on their crossing, transiting, and establishment in Mexico throughout the "Remain in Mexico" era and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The last part addresses our conclusions and future research regarding the experience of migrants crossing, transiting, and establishing in Mexico either because they are waiting for their asylum process due to the "Remain in Mexico" policy or because they have decided to permanently establish in these local Mexican communities.

Research on this subject is of importance due to its recency and the potential long lasting effects on migration. In the past couple of years more research has been conducted in this topic; however, research which takes into account migrant's narratives is needed. There is also a lack of research on migration in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the impacts of the Migrant Protection Protocols program. This project aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of migrant's experiences throughout their journey and establishment in Mexico.

## **1.1 Literature Review/Theoretical Framework**

Migration to the United States is not a new phenomenon nor is Mexico acting as a country of origin and transit for thousands of migrants each year. The implementation of the Bracero Program in 1942, which allowed Mexican men to work legally in the U.S. on short term contracts, set a precedent for the relationship between both countries and the U.S. dependence on migrant labor (Tienda M, Sanchez S, 2013). Historically, Mexico has been the main sending country of migrants in the U.S; with Mexicans being the largest group across most types of immigration statuses, a fact that has had important implications in U.S. immigration policy (Mexican Migration to the United States: Policy and Trends, 2012). However, since the U.S. 2008-2009 financial crisis there has been an exponential drop in the number of Mexican individuals seeking to migrate to the U.S, and many more making the decision to return to Mexico (Runde, Daniel F., et al. 2019). Durand and Massey (2019) further analyze this pattern and state that the decrease of Mexican migration to the U.S. has been exponential to a point in which the net balance of migration reached zero at the beginning of the current century. This decrease in migration of Mexican citizens along with an increase in migrants from other regions of the world due to social, economic, and political instability has resulted in a shift in configuration in migration to the U.S. It is imperative to note that this shift has had implications for Mexico due to the diverse roles it plays in the process of migration to the United States. García, N. Silvia and Dávila P.,María del Consuelo (2022) state that throughout the years the migration processes in Mexico have become more varied and complex; resulting in Mexico evolving into a ‘global migration hub’ in the way that it is a country of origin, reception, transit, and destination of migrants (García, N. Silvia and Dávila Pérez, María del Consuelo, 2022).

Runde, Daniel F., et al present potential reasons for the decade-long decrease of Mexican citizens migrating to the U.S and higher return migration. Runde et al. argue that this could potentially be a result of a slow but somewhat steady economic and social growth in the nation; however, it has also posed challenges for the Mexican state. Nevertheless, there has been a new surge of Mexican migrants to the U.S. between the years 2019-2022. Experts and organizations such as the Migration Policy Institute argue that this increment is correlated to the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbating poverty, violence, and already existing issues in public health; taking the country a step back from the growth Runde, Daniel F., et al refer to.

Soto, Ariel G. Ruiz (2022) concurs that there has been an increase in not only Mexican but also Central American migrants attempting to cross into the US; however, Soto highlights data from the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) which shows that there has been a significant increase in encounters with asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border from countries such as Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, Haiti, Senegal, Angola, Congo, Ghana, Ukraine, India, Turkey, among others. The author states that, as of the year 2022, growing numbers of individuals from countries infrequently seen before are transiting South and Central America through Mexico and to the United States. Soto follows up on the new patterns of migration by stating that countries such as Nicaragua which, historically, has been a country of origin of migrants to Costa Rica has experienced a shift with more and more migrants heading to Mexico and the US. This is argued to be attributed to the pull-factors the northern nations have to offer.

In order to understand the emerging waves of migration to the U.S and Mexico, Douglas Massey's theoretical concept of push-pull factors (Massey et al., 1998), which attempts to explain the causes of international migration by identifying the factors or "push factors" that drive people out of certain territories, and the "pull factors" that attract people to other countries,



is appropriate. Push factors can include, but are not limited to, high levels of violence, poverty, impacts of climate change and natural disasters. The more stable conditions the US and Mexico have to offer such as better social and financial opportunities constitute pull factors that attract immigrants. The promise of better opportunities influences individuals to migrate regardless of the risks the journey presents.

As stated by Soto, Ariel G. Ruiz (2022), the increasing diversification of places of origin of the migrants in transit through Mexico to the US shows a set of evolving push factors. Mexico's Refugee Commission (COMAR) reported a total of 3,346 requests for humanitarian visas in Mexico during the first six months of 2022 from citizens of Senegal, Angola, Congo, Ghana and neighboring countries, compared to 1,901 requests in all of 2021. OCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) reports that the primary push factors for African migrants are conflict, repressive governance, and limited economic opportunities. Furthermore, according to data published by the United Nations in mid-2015, almost 1 million Colombians fled the war and economic conditions and since the mid-2010s more than 6 million Venezuelans have fled their country due to this turmoil and human rights violations. Therefore, there has been an exponential increase in Venezuelan and Colombian migrants crossing through Mexico with the hope to request asylum in the US. A report made by The New York Times states that in 2022 at least 150,000 Venezuelans have arrived at the U.S. border (Shortell and Turkewitz, 2022). Another key example is the influx of Haitian refugees who flee their country due to political instability, violence, and the detrimental impacts natural disasters have had in their country; with many of them seeking entrance to the US but deciding to establish in Mexico. The COMAR reports that the number of Haitians seeking protection in Mexico grew from less than one percent of all applicants in 2013 to 39 percent in 2021. With

many nations around the world facing conflict, instability, and the effects of climate change (these all being push factors), many people have and continue to migrate to countries with better opportunities (or pull-factors). Push and pull factors play a fundamental role not only in the decision of people to migrate to the US but also in the establishment of many in Mexico.

Furthermore, another key point for this research is Central American migration; which has been at the center of debate in Mexico and the US for the past years due to its politicization. Setting aside the shift of configuration of migration to the US, the influx of Central American migrants set a precedent for the Trump and Lopez-Obrador administrations to implement the Migrant Protection Protocols program. When it comes to Central American migration, in specific from the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador), the number of migrants has increased significantly over the past 30 years, by 137 per cent between 1990 and 2020, from 6.82 million to almost 16.2 million (UNDESA, 2020). A model developed at the *University of Texas at Austin's Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law*, estimated 407,000 people, on average, left the Northern Triangle region of Central America per year between 2018 to 2021, with the majority bound for the United States. The model depicts the variation in migrant flow from year to year, with an estimated 691,000 people leaving the region in 2019 and an estimated 112,000 people leaving in 2020 (“Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy”, 2022). Most of the Central American US-bound migrants seek to arrive at the US-Mexico border; which often means that they face the challenge to cross Mexico via railroads, bus, or even foot. Therefore, there has been a striking increase in Central American migrants in transit through Mexico, with a significant presence of women and minors (Paris, 2017).

Throughout 2018-2022 several *Caravans*, composed of thousands of people traveling from Central America to the Mexico–U.S. border seeking refuge from their home countries, were

organized (Madrigal, G., & Soroka, S., 2023). Odgers and Olivas (2019) argue that, although migration from the Northern Triangle has been ongoing and increasing, there has been more widespread visibility of Central American migrants in the mass media due to the organization of the *Caravans* and their politicization. These Caravans were used to promote anti-immigrant rhetoric. When addressing these mass displacements, the Trump administration labeled them as an “invasion” (Odgers and Olivas, 2019), and urged for more control at the southern border as well as the intervention of the Mexican government.

In order to explain anti-immigrant rhetoric and the persistence of many politicians to introduce severe migration policies, such as the *Remain in Mexico* policy, and more border control, Douglas S. Massey (2016) introduces a process referred by scholars as the *securitization of migration*. Douglas states that the process of *securitization of migration* has its roots in how the US-Mexico border has evolved in the American consciousness and become a symbolic boundary between the United States and a threatening world; a world of violence, poverty, organized crime, among others. The symbolic framing of the Southern border places a sense of urgency to implement policies and practices that keep these threats outside of US soil. The fear of foreigners, in this case refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants overall, bringing violence, drugs, and instability to the US typecasts the subject of migration into a matter of security. In other words, migration shifts from a social issue to a security one. Atak, I., & Crepeau, F. (2013) describe that the existential threat to the fundamental values of a society and the State contributes to convince a sector of society that exceptional measures are necessary to respond to risk. In the name of protection and survival, the measures taken tend to reach above and beyond the ordinary political process (Atak, I., & Crepeau, F. (2013). In addition, Russo, R (2008) highlights that, in terms of migration, securitization is often promoted by one actor, for instance a political party, or

by a group of actors such as a political party, the media, or a religious organization; with the most common arguments pro-securitization quoting economic, social, and political concerns (Russo, R., 2008). The process often concludes in multilateral and bilateral agreements being signed, extradition and deportation agreements between receiving and sending nations being authorized, and conventions and protocols being ratified, among many other actions due to the linkage between migration and security (Bourbeau, P., 2011).

The Trump administration, characterized by its pro-securitization and anti-immigrant ideology, utilized the sense of urgency and strong conviction of certain sectors of society of the need to secure the US-Mexico border as a means of justification to implement drastic measures and policies such as the *Migrant Protection Protocols*. The rhetoric used by President Trump and his administration, which categorized migrants as violent, dirty, bearing drugs, among others, was used to solidify the need for securitization. This is especially true in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although it is true that this rhetoric was exhibited prior to the appearance of Covid-19, it most certainly exacerbated throughout it due to the merging of two threats: a public health and a safety one.

However, it must be emphasized that the idea of securitization of migration is not exclusive to the United States. It is a phenomenon also seen in other countries. Leutert, Stephanie (2018) points out the emergence of securitization of migration in Mexico and its impact on not only crossing Central American migrants but also on those from many other countries. Leutert argues that Mexico throughout the last decades, in a similar way as its neighboring country, has adopted a different lens when it comes to addressing migration. Due to higher levels of migrants, in specific refugees and asylum seekers, crossing through Mexico and many deciding to stay in the country, Mexico has increasingly viewed migration policy as a national security issue

(Leutert, S., 2018) . With Mexico facing its own influx of irregular migration, the state and many sectors of society have progressively favored the militarization of its own southern border with Guatemala; this being argued as a means to control violence and organized crime entering through the southern border. This being a similar rhetoric used in the US. The concept of securitization of migration is an important one for this research because the correlation between migration and a threat to the common good of society is found at the root of the *Remain in Mexico* policy, and also influences the experiences of migrants from all over the world at the US-Mexico border as well as those establishing in Mexico. While limited research has been conducted on the effects of the Migration Protection Protocols (“Remain in Mexico” policy), this is a key factor of the now surge of migrants stranded and establishing in Mexico.

## **1.2 Methodology**

This research project combines qualitative data collected through interviews with local NGOs between September 2020 to February 2021 as well as secondary (and open) sources including sources from UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), International Organization for Migration (IOM), USCIS (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services), U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, and COMAR (Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados). Other sources include Mexican and US news, journals, and books about Mexican and Central American migration to the US, gangs, organized crime, and violence. Also, Internet websites from the Department of Homeland Security, COMAR, and Advocacy for Human Rights in the Americas (WOLA), and other organizations were reviewed.

For the qualitative data collection portion of this research through interviews with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) we selected them based on their focus on helping

migrants and refugees in the U.S.-Mexico border. The selection took into account programs and initiatives these organizations have in place for migrants seeking asylum and/or establishing in Mexico. Over 10 bi-national NGOs were contacted via email but due to the obstacles the COVID-19 pandemic placed, only three interviews were able to be conducted with representatives from La Casa del Migrante located in Tijuana, Al Otro Lado in Tijuana, and Border Angels in San Diego. Zoom was selected as the preferred medium of communication for the safety of all participants due to the pandemic, and each interview took about one and a half hours. Advisor Dr. Alma Bezares-Calderon was present at each meeting and representatives were informed about the nature of the research project and were asked for consent to record the interview. It must be noted that the interview with La Casa del Migrante was conducted in Spanish, therefore the questionnaire and responses provided were translated by the researchers. No compensation was provided to the participants.

Researchers developed an eight question questionnaire that covered the main concerns of the study.

1. Can you explain what type of services you offer to migrants?
2. How many people do you have under your care?
3. What are the principal challenges for your organization when it comes to helping migrants?
4. What are the principal challenges for the migrants?
5. What has changed for your organization due to Covid-19? What are the new challenges?
6. What has changed for the migrants due to Covid-19?

7. Could you please explain in more detail the challenges migrants face in terms of the violence they suffer, living conditions and how COVID-19 has changed this?
8. Do you think that the local and national authorities in Mexico and in the U.S. have responded to the needs of migrants during this pandemic?

This research focuses on the following topics: the experiences U.S-bound migrants face while transiting Mexico, the living conditions of migrants who have decided to stay in Mexico, and how migrants influence the communities that they cross or where they establish themselves in Mexico.

### **1.3 Transit: Crossing Mexico**

The first step to understanding the impact of crossing and establishing migrants in local communities in Mexico is tracing the routes taken in order to arrive at the US-Mexico border. Tracing these routes also allows us to locate the main areas and communities where migrants establish in Mexico and their interactions with such. Throughout this section we analyze the arrival of migrants in Mexico via its border with Guatemala and the main routes migrants use to cross Mexico.

One of the main routes taken by migrants heading north from Central America usually starts at the Mexico-Guatemala border. In order to analyze the transit routes starting at this particular area, it is important to address the common misconception that only Central American migrants are crossing through this pathway. As stated throughout this report, the presence of push factors (Massey et al., 1998) in countries across the globe and the pull factors North American countries exhibit has led to a diversification of migration. Therefore, migrants from diverse nationalities along with Central American migrants attempt to cross the Guatemala-Mexico border everyday. This topic will continue to be analyzed in the context of

how individuals from diverse backgrounds and their intersectionality influence the interactions with local Mexican communities.

When looking at the geography of the Northern Triangle (figure 1), Guatemalan immigrants are objectively closer to the Mexican border than Salvadoran or Hondurans who face the need to also cross through Guatemala. The Belize-Mexico border is also another viable port of entry; however, the CA-4 or Central America-4 Free Mobility Agreement, established in 2006 between the Northern Triangle nations, which allows their citizens to move freely throughout the region without the need for visas, has made it easier for migrants to travel through Guatemala on their way to the United States. Making the Guatemala-Mexico border the main port of entry for migrants from the Northern Triangle.

However, the Mexican Consulate in Toronto website states that citizens of 68 countries who wish to visit, transit, or do business in the country for up to 180 days do not require a visa (list that includes European, Asian, North American, and some South American countries), but Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador are not included in this group. The need to apply for a visa or asylum in order to enter Mexico and the long, usually unknown, time frames of processing leaves thousands of migrants with the challenge of crossing irregularly. Crossing irregularly increases the vulnerability of migrants to various threats ranging from dangerous ecosystems to violence from several actors such as people smugglers, organized crime, the state, among others.

The Guatemala-Mexico border has been a reliable point of entry for migrants. Crossing through this border has historically been defined as relatively easy due to light patrolling of the state and with migrant checkpoints found further into the cities of Chiapas and Tabasco (Carattini, D., 2016). However, due the higher influx of migrants, mass media coverage of the Central



American caravans, and the US putting pressure on Mexico to secure the border, has led to higher vigilance from Mexican authorities with more checkpoints and presence of the state in bordering states. Although the increase of surveillance can be traced years back, the emphasis on border security

This is in part a result of the Trump administration threatening to impose trade tariffs if Mexico didn't help stop Central American migrants from reaching the U.S. border (Galemba, R., 2019). However, the pressure of patrolling Mexico's southern border was not exclusive to Trump's administration. The Biden administration in April 2021, communicated about a bilateral agreement with Mexico, Honduras and Guatemala, in which each nation pledged to increase the police and military presence on their borders and along common migratory routes (Kaufman, R., 2021). Mexico pledged to maintain 10,000 troops at its border, resulting in twice as many daily migrant interdictions. Guatemala pledged to add 1,500 police and military personnel to its southern border with Honduras and agreed to set up 12 checkpoints along the migratory route. Honduras pledged to add 7,000 police and military to dispage migrants. The exponential increase of military and police presence at the border and the Mexican states of Chiapas and Tabasco has translated into migrants looking for new points of entry and routes. It is important to mention that Latin America's largest migrant detention center (which the INM calls a "migration station") is located in the city of Tapachula, Chiapas, one of the principal entry points into Mexico (Isacson, A. et al, 2014).

The Mexico-Guatemala border is delimited by the Suchiate and Usumacinta rivers, and comprises 53% of its length. Similarly, 87% of the border between Mexico and Belize is delineated by the Hondo River (González G., Y. 2016). In this sense, the jungle, rainforests, and bodies of water separating Mexico from Central America create a porous and mobile border,

which has presented both an advantage and disadvantage for crossing migrants. Changing and often drastic conditions in these ecosystems as well as its flora and fauna have the potential to negatively affect their transit through the area. The porous nature of the Guatemala-Mexico border allows not only migrants but also organized crime to travel to the area.

With limited mobility through Mexico and higher vulnerability to violence due to their irregular status and often limited financial resources, most migrants utilize land routes to move across the nation. Land route travel can be subdivided into rail, on foot, passenger buses, and private cars. The freight cargo train known as “La Bestia” or “The Beast” is the most popular medium of transportation for migrants accessing Mexico through Guatemala. La Bestia presents an opportunity for migrants unable to pay the high fees people smugglers commonly known as *coyotes or polleros* charge; fees which exceeded US\$8,000 back in 2014 just to cross Mexico and estimated to increase due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the higher patrolling of Mexico’s southern border (Isacson, A, et al, 2014). In addition, Mexican officials patrol the roads, bus stations, and airports but not La Bestia, which proves to be a logical route for undocumented migrants (Carattini, D., 2016). Figures 2, 3, and 4 depict the available routes transited by La Bestia. As shown on figure 2 and 4, the start of the train’s route is located in Tapachula, Chiapas and Tenosique, Tabasco. Figure 2 highlights the three train routes migrants utilize. The route depicted shows that once migrants cross the Mexico-Guatemala border they generally arrive either to Tabasco or Chiapas depending on the used port of entry; states in which La Bestia starts its journey (Carattini, D., 2016). Starting from Tapachula, the estimated road distance to Reynosa is 1,449 miles, to Piedras Negras 1,530 miles, Ciudad Juárez 1,863 miles, Nogales 2,127 miles, and Tijuana 2,497 miles (Li Ng, J., 2020).

The main three train routes are categorized as follows: Pacific route, Central route, and Gulf route. The Pacific route is usually taken by migrants seeking to arrive in Tijuana, Baja California and cross to San Diego, CA. California's "sanctuary state" status makes the Pacific route one of the most transited ones (Gonzales, D., 2018). This route (blue) crosses the Mexican states of Puebla, Hidalgo, Jalisco, Nayarit, Sinaloa, Sonora, and Baja California (figure 2). The Central route (green) crosses through the states of Puebla, Hidalgo, San Luis Potosi, Zacatecas, and Coahuila. This route takes migrants to the Coahuila-Texas border area; Perlas Negras, Coahuila is the destination for migrants seeking access to Texas (figure 2). The Gulf route (purple), the shortest route of all three, crosses the states of Veracruz and Tamaulipas. Despite this being the shortest route to the US-Mexico border, many migrants decide to not travel through it due to the ongoing high levels of violence the area experiences. Veracruz and Tamaulipas are states known to be hotspots of violence perpetrated by organized crime groups such as the *Zetas*, *the Gulf Cartel*, and other subgroups created within these. Although cartel violence is pervasive in most Mexican states, these two particular groups, particularly the *Zetas*, are characterized by a turbulent relationship with migrants. In August 2010 the San Fernando Massacre took place, in which member of *Los Zetas* mass murdered 72 undocumented migrants in Tamaulipas; but the number of murders of migrants perpetrated by this criminal group in only that particular year is estimated to surpass 196 executions (A Decade After San Fernando Massacre, Migrants Still Face Violence, Impunity for Abuses in Mexico, 2020). Migrants continue to follow this route to the Tamaulipas-Texas border but the known dangers encourage many to make the decision to follow the Pacific route to Tijuana, Baja California; as was the case of caravans coming from Central America in 2018 (Gonzales, D., 2018).

The relationship between train routes, La Bestia's route in particular, have outlined the course migrants take in order to arrive at the US-Mexico border. Figure 5 shows the main migration routes from Central America through Mexico. In this map we can observe that there are routes other than the ones following "La Bestia"; although it is shown that La Bestia serves as a reference point for migrant's journeys through Mexico. It must be highlighted that given the dangers of traveling in this train which extend from physical injury, violence from several actors, to even death as well as the unpredictable stops of the train makes this odyssey an extremely challenging one. Another key point is that throughout their passage individuals interact with local communities when staying in shelters or migrant houses as well as when transiting on foot or local transportation, among others.

Figure 5 also depicts maritime routes which have been historically less transited but also important. According to the human rights organization Amnesty International, a 400-kilometer (250-mile) alternative route is being used to move immigrants from the northern Guatemalan port of Ocos to ports in the Mexican states of Chiapas and Oaxaca. Immigrants travel north from there using various overland routes along the Gulf or Pacific coasts. Due to organized crime, natural disasters, and patrolling from the Mexican state, individuals have found ways to alter their land and maritime routes.

Another aspect that influences the routes migrants choose to travel is the access to humanitarian services. These include migrant houses, shelters, soup kitchens, among others. BBVA Research 2020 report on migrant houses and shelters shows that most of these are located in south and central Mexico. While the report does not include every shelter, soup kitchen, and migrant house, it does provide an overview of where the main and most popular ones are located.

Throughout this map (figure 5) we are able to observe that after the states of San Luis Potosi, Nayarit, and Zacatecas there are significant distances between the next humanitarian aid center. This map allows us to have an understanding of the most transit routes since it is assumed that higher levels of crossing migrants and need correlate to more shelters, soup kitchens, etc put in place. BBVA research states that in the Center and South-Southeast of Mexico the aid is located a few yards or very close to the route of "The Beast", or in relevant entry cities of migrants. The lack of presence of humanitarian aid throughout the Gulf route could be a result of less transit of migrants. Nicole Elizabeth Ramos, Border Rights Project director in Al Otro Lado, provided us with information regarding the different ways migrants receive aid throughout their journey. Ramos introduced us to the work of "Las Patronas". This is a group of women in Veracruz who have organized to prepare and deliver food for migrants traveling in La Bestia. Although not portrayed on the BBVA map, "Las Patronas" are an example of civilian organized groups helping migrants throughout the Gulf route. Humanitarian aid is essential for migrants crossing through Mexico since the cost of traveling north can be up to thousands of dollars. They are not only required to cover their basic needs but also face extortion from organized crime groups as well as police and military. The further migrants come from, the higher the cost.

Crossing Mexico is not an easy task. The route itself is long and often not easy to access. In addition they face violence, discrimination, and lack of basic resources. In the next sections we analyze the establishment of migrants throughout these routes in the context of the "Remain in Mexico" program, their interactions with local Mexican communities, and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 1: Map of Central America with the Northern Triangle Countries



Figure 2: Train Routes Used by Central American Migrants in Mexico

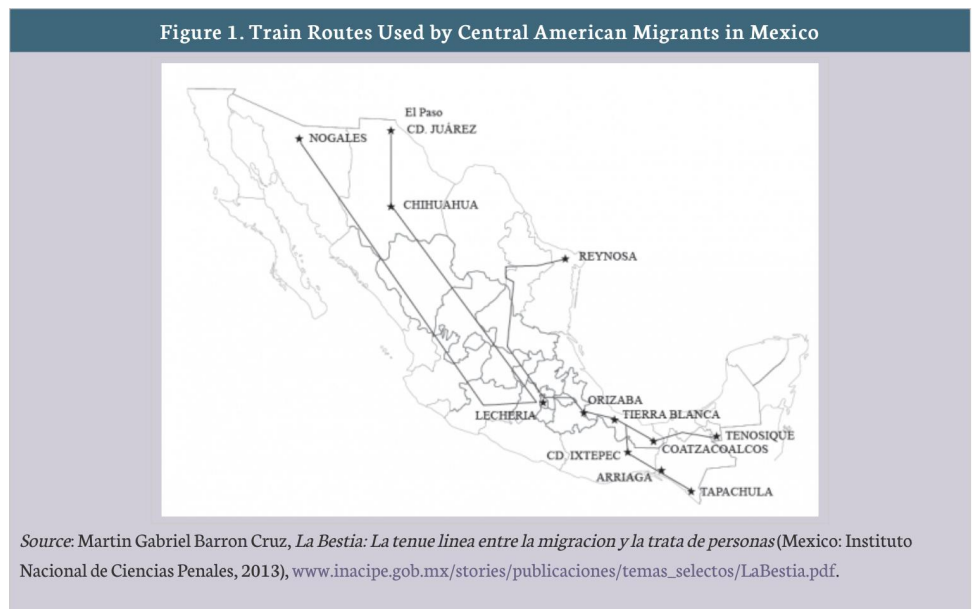


Figure 3: Train Routes by Intended Entry Point to the United States

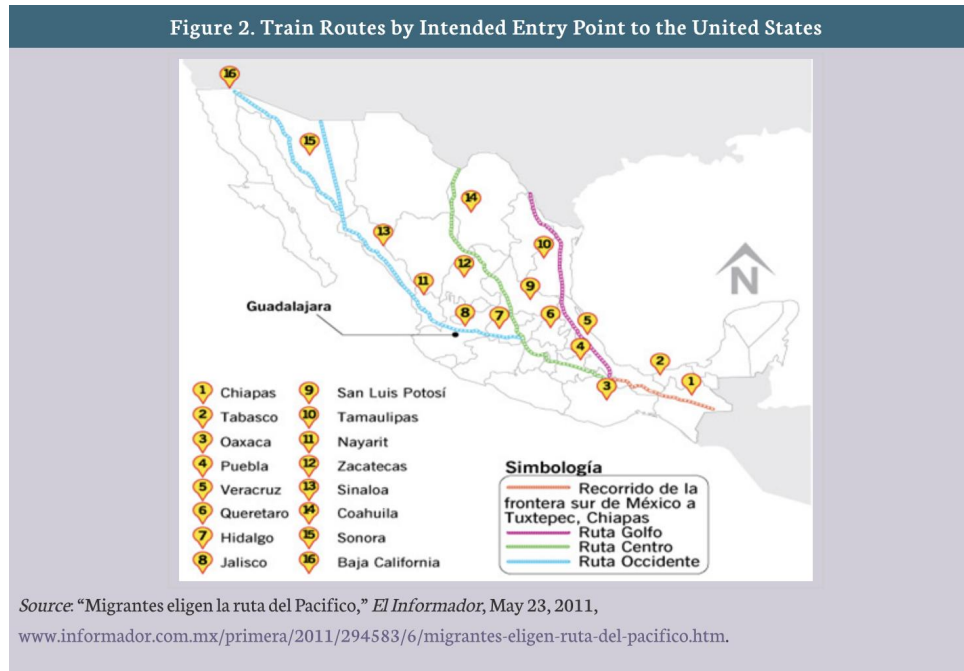
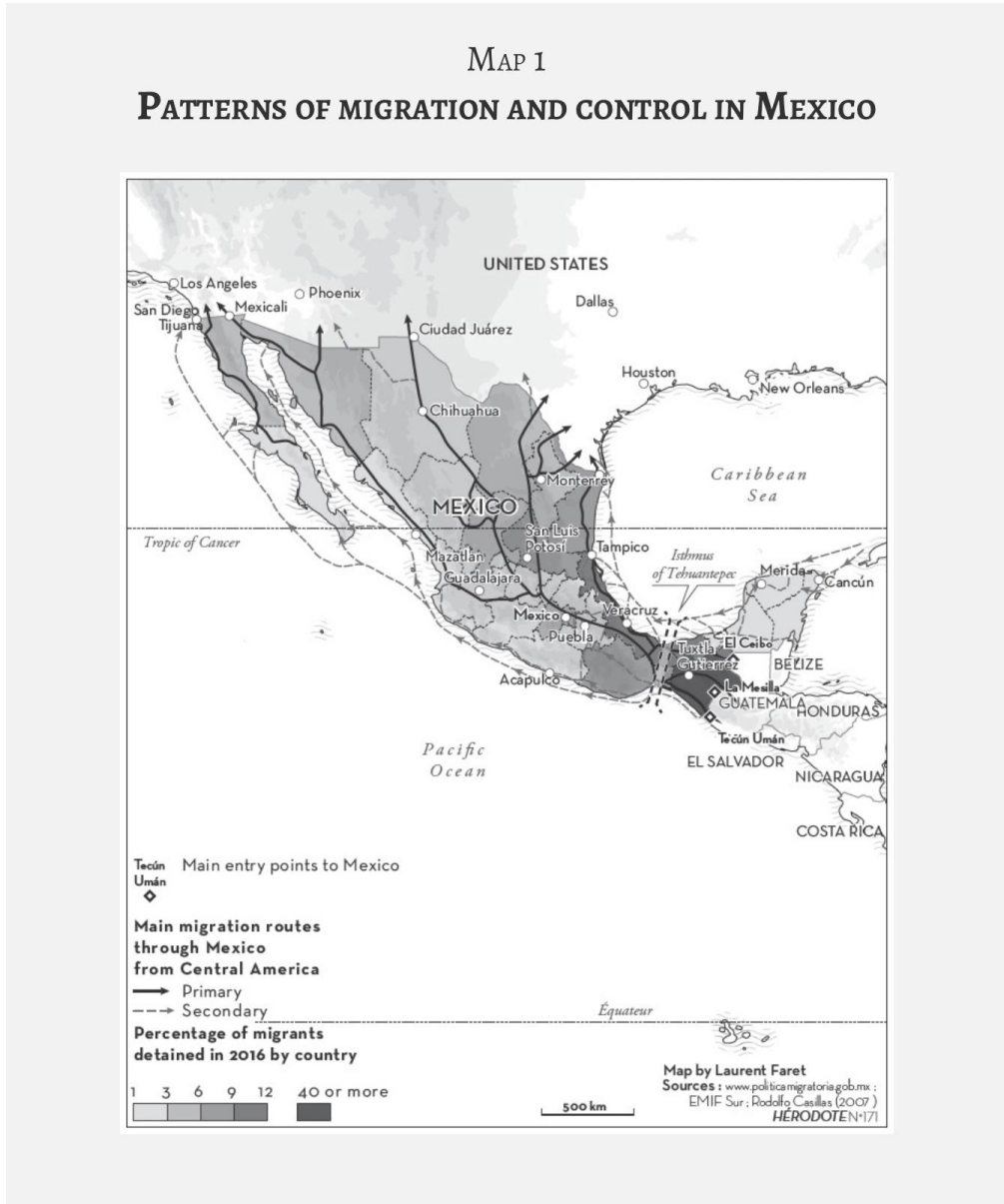


Figure 4: The Beast Routes from Tenosique/Tapachula to the United States



Source: "Central American Migrants Face Grueling Journey North," *Dallas Morning News*, accessed March 12, 2016, <http://res.dallasnews.com/interactives/migrantroute/>.

Figure 5: Patterns of Migration and Control in Mexico





Map 6: Shelters and aid for migrants across the migration routes.



## 1.4 “The Remain in Mexico Policy” and the Establishment of Migrants in Mexico:

### Overview

On December 20, 2018, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued a press release that officially announced the Migrant Protection Protocols or “Remain in Mexico” policy and launched new guidelines for CBP officers to follow when processing asylum seekers at the southern border. The press release communicated that under these new guidelines migrants

seeking asylum now had to “wait for an immigration court decision while they wait in Mexico” (Luert, S. et al, 2020). The rationale behind such guidelines was to decrease “illegal immigration” by discouraging thousands of asylum seekers, in general from Central America, to embark on the journey to the US. As previously discussed, this is a result of the process of securitization of migration in which, in this case, asylum turns from a social issue to a security one. “Illegal migrants” become a threat to the safety and well-being of the nation and therefore programs such as MPP are established in order to keep a threat outside US borders. Another rationale for such policy provided by the administration was to alleviate the backlog of approximately 786,000 pending asylum cases at the time. The press release continued to state that Mexico would be in charge of providing humanitarian visas, work authorization and other protections to asylum seekers waiting at the border.

News outlets such as the *Washington Post* reported that Mexico had been part of the negotiations leading to the MPP being established. A non-publicized meeting on November 24th, 2018 between Trump administration’s Secretary of Homeland Security and Kirstjen Nielsen and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo with Mexico’s incoming Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard in Houston, Texas is believed to have set the first step for the development of the now known “Remain in Mexico” policy (Luert, S et al, 2020). The *Washington Post*’s November 2018 article also states that President Lopez Obrador’s (also known as AMLO) cabinet not only played a role in the creation of the policy but also agreed to it. The article quotes AMLO’s Interior Minister stating Mexico had agreed to the “Remain in Mexico” policy. However, after some back and forth between both administrations and with the Department of Homeland Security official announcement framing the decision as unilateral without mention of briefs between both countries, Mexico’s role in the MPP development and establishment still remains unclear. One

thing both countries seem to agree upon is Mexico's focus on migrants' wellbeing, committing to "protect the rights of those who wish to begin and continue the process of applying for asylum in U.S. territory" (Luert S, et al., 2020).

Although the participation and/or agreement of the Mexican government to MPP is unclear, it could still be an indicator of Mexico's own process of securitization of migration. While the Lopez Obrador administration has made an effort in promoting pro-immigrant rhetoric and promised to improve infrastructure to accommodate new and already residing migrants as well as the establishment of programs for them to work in Mexico, little progress has been made. In addition, the administration's decision of deploying an unprecedented number of troops to secure their own southern border as well as the lack of monetary support to the Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (Mexican Commission to Aid Refugees, COMAR) shows contradictory behavior by the Mexican government. According to the UNHCR, there are only 10 offices located all Mexico, and have less than 100 employees across the country. As part of austerity measures, AMLO has also cut funding at COMAR to its lowest in seven years. Though the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has announced it will support COMAR to open additional offices in Mexico, including the first along Mexico's northern border, the agency is still not equipped to deal with the 31,355 people who claimed asylum in Mexico in the first half of 2019—what the UNHCR reports as a 204 percent increase over the same period in 2018.

### **The start of MPP**

On January 28, 2019 the Department of Homeland Security announced MPP's official launch and was steadily implemented across the US-Mexico border. From its implementation in January 2019 until the time President Trump left office in January, it is estimated around 71,000

asylum seekers were enrolled in the program and left stranded in Mexico. Once the Biden administration took office, the MPP was expected to come to an end due to the termination of this program being included in President Biden's campaign promises. The Biden Administration attempted to end MPP in June 2021, but was blocked from doing so by a judge for the Northern District of Texas, which forced the administration to re-start MPP under "good faith" (Homeland Security, 2021).

Later, in October 2021 the Biden administration announced the reinstatement of the program with the promise of working with Mexican government officials to provide increased access to legal representation and faster court hearings to people already enrolled in MPP as well as better screening for particularly vulnerable individuals ("The Restart of MPP is a Betrayal of President Biden's Promises To Restore a Humane Asylum System", 2021). While the announcement was made in October 2021, the White House officially relaunched the program in December 2021. Many refer to this relaunch as MPP 2.0. Since its revival and as of May 2022, about 5,000 asylum seekers were enrolled in the program, according to the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, a research organization at Syracuse University. The program finally came to an end in August 2022 when the Department of Homeland Security announced that the Northern District of Texas lifted the injunction that required DHS to reimplement the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) in good faith. The termination lacked clarity of how asylum seekers already enrolled in MPP would continue their cases but the DHS confirmed through their website that "individuals are no longer being newly enrolled into MPP, and individuals currently in MPP in Mexico will be disenrolled when they return for their next scheduled court date. Individuals disenrolled from MPP will continue their removal proceedings in the United States." However, experts and humanitarian organizations agree that bringing thousands of enrolled

asylum seekers across the border could take months or even years. Also, taking into consideration the fact that many have already decided to establish themselves in Mexico and some have applied for asylum there it is unknown how many asylum seekers once waiting for their case to be heard will actually proceed with it. The termination of the MPP does provide relief to asylum seekers waiting to enter the US but most of them are and will continue to wait in Mexico for long periods of time.

### **Implementation and Effects of MPP and the Establishment of Migrants in Mexico**

The MPP was steadily implemented across the U.S.-Mexico border. The program began in San Diego, with CBP sending the first MPP returnee to Tijuana on January 29, 2019. MPP was next reported in Calexico on March 14, 2019. Shortly after, on March 21, 2019, El Paso implemented the program. On July 9, 2019, MPP expanded to Laredo and then to Brownsville on July 19, 2019. On October 28, 2019, MPP was implemented in Eagle Pass. Finally, on January 2, 2020, the program expanded to Nogales. By 2020 the program covered the border in its entirety. Below is a depiction of the US/Mexico border map and the main ports of entry for migrants and where the MPP was put in place. In the previous section migrant crossing routes were addressed and on figure 7 we can see that the end points of the Pacific, Central, and Gulf route which are Tijuana, Mexicali, Ciudad Juárez, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, and Tamaulipas were all impacted by the MPP. Asylum seekers who crossed Mexico, regardless of the route taken, and arrived at the US/Mexico border with the hope of their cases being heard by US immigration authorities, had virtually no other choice but to remain in Mexican border cities to wait for their court hearings. Asylum seekers entering through San Diego, CA and Calexico were returned to Tijuana and Mexicali respectively. Those entering through Tucson were returned to Nogales, Sonora; and those accessing through El Paso, Eagle Pass, Laredo, and Brownsville were sent back to Ciudad

Juarez, Piedras Negras, Nuevo Laredo, and Matamoros respectively (figure 8). Figure 8 shows the place of entry and the MPP return city.

Figure 7- Source: Author Elaboration



Figure 8 - Source: Author's elaboration

<b>Place of Entry</b>	<b>MPP Return City</b>
San Diego, CA: San Diego Sector	Tijuana, Baja California
Calexico, CA: El Centro Sector, Yuma Sector	Mexicali, Baja California
Tucson, AZ: Tucson Sector	Nogales, Sonora
El Paso, TX: Del Paso Sector, Big Bend Sector	Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua
Eagle Pass, TX: Del Rio Sector	Piedras Negras, Coahuila
Laredo, TX: Laredo Sector	Nuevo Laredo, TX
Brownsville, TX: Rio Grande Valley Sector	Matamoros, Tamaulipas

According to the U.S. government's "guiding principles" for MPP, certain groups were considered exempt from the MPP process:

- Unaccompanied children
- Citizens or nationals of Mexico
- Individuals processed for expedited removal
- Individuals in "special circumstances," including:
- Individuals with "known physical/mental health issues"
- Individuals with criminal records or a history of violence
- Individuals determined by an asylum officer to be "more likely than not" to face torture or persecution in Mexico on the basis of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group

The decision making process of whether to send an individual or family back to Mexico was completely discretionary under MPP. These decisions were made by individual CBP officers

or Border Patrol agents. CBP also retained discretion to take any individual out of MPP on a case by case basis.

In addition, CBP had stated that it did not subject individuals to MPP who were from countries where Spanish is not the primary language (for example, African and Asian countries), although nothing in the MPP “guiding principles” required their exclusion. In December 2019, Acting CBP Commissioner Mark Morgan threatened to end this exemption and send individuals from non-Spanish-speaking countries back to Mexico under MPP, emphasizing that the policy could be changed at any moment. This was followed by DHS announcing the expansion of MPP to Brazilian asylum seekers in January 2020 (International Migration Council, 2022). Central American asylum seekers were the main target of this measure given the exponential growth in migration from this area as well as the media coverage and politicization of such. However, the ACLU reported in 2021 that Cubans and Venezuelans were increasingly placed into the program, along with African asylum-seekers fleeing active conflicts in countries like Cameroon; despite CBP stating no individuals from non-Spanish speaking countries were subject to MPP.

Once an asylum seeker was enrolled in MPP and was unable to prove they would most likely than not face torture or persecution in Mexico, they would be returned to Mexican border cities with a court appearance notice; with some court dates scheduled up to a year or more from the individual’s first entrance date. According to the ACLU, the MPP was set up in a way in which migrants, even those with proper evidence and credible fear to stay in Mexico, would not be allowed to enter the United States or granted a regular asylum case. Most of the migrants enrolled in MPP were not correctly informed about their options and rights when undergoing the process which increased their vulnerability. This led to migrants from different countries being stranded in the cities mentioned above. Family separation also became a common phenomenon



throughout the MPP era since the decision to separate children from their families was made under the discretion of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers or Border Patrol agents. Although some were excluded from the MPP, asylum seekers from all over the world face the challenges of staying in Mexico in order to wait for a Border official to hear their case due to the already backlogged system plus the thousands of new applications.

As a result, by the end of August 2019, according to the US Department of Homeland Security, the number of undocumented migrants stranded in Mexican locations along the US border totalled more than 37,000, and many began to disperse through Mexico (O'Toole, 2019). While the Trump administration considered this as a highly successful measure, the suffering and violence migrants endured by migrants in Mexico exposed Mexico's inability to protect them. The Mexican states to which migrants returned experience some of the highest rates of violence in the nation. The state of Tamaulipas, home of the border city of Matamoros, has been categorized as a "Do Not Travel" state by the US Department of State due to crime and kidnapping (Rodriguez A. K., 2022). In a similar way, the states of Baja California and Sonora, also home to the border towns of Tijuana, Mexicali, and Nogales, were categorized under "Reconsider To Travel " due to crime and kidnapping. The high levels of violence and impunity has migrants describing the border towns as "war zones" (Agren, D., 2019).

Despite the levels of violence and lack of resources and protection, asylum seekers remained in these border cities awaiting their court hearings. Migrants sent back to the border cities of Tijuana, Mexicali, Nogales, Ciudad Juárez, Piedras Negras, Nuevo Laredo, and Matamoros, without any support from the US and Mexico's lack of structure and resources, had to fend for themselves. Many migrants faced homelessness and relied on local shelters such as *La Casa Del Migrante*, a network of shelters with presence in Mexico and Guatemala. In our

interview with Graciela Parra, the operative coordinator of *La Casa del Migrante* in Tijuana, she elaborated on the fact that, throughout MPP, shelters were overcrowded and reached a point where they could not accommodate any more migrants. Conditions which worsened throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Parra shared that in her experience as operative coordinator, many migrants tend to establish themselves in areas surrounded by humanitarian care such as shelters, migrant houses, soup kitchens, etc. Al Otro Lado's director of Border Rights Project, Nicole Ramos echoed Parra's statement by sharing that migrants, even if not currently staying at a shelter or migrant house, usually make the decision of establishing in the area and tend to often come back to receive food, personal hygiene products, and other necessities as well as resources and, in some cases, legal help. Ramos shared that shelters usually provide a set amount of days in which migrants can stay because of the high demand they experience but continue to support migrants even in many aspects; even with finding job opportunities in the area. With many migrants traveling solo and without knowledge of the area they tend to rely on humanitarian aid.

During MPP, migrants waiting for their asylum court dates and unable to leave the area due to the fear of missing an opportunity to enter the US, established in the cities and areas closest to the border. Given the overflow many private local shelters as well as those set up by the Mexican government experienced, asylum seekers had to sleep on the streets and some created tent camps. In the case of the border city of Matamoros, tent camps for thousands of asylum seekers to reside appeared in 2019 along the Rio Grande. The conditions of these tent camps were inhumane without running water or electricity (American Immigration Council, 2022).

Throughout MPP, Tijuana, Mexicali, and Ciudad Juarez were the main cities of destination and establishment of asylum seekers in Mexico. Since the Central and Gulf routes to

the US-Mexico border have proven to be hostile environments for migrants, many take the Pacific route to Mexicali and Tijuana, Baja California. In November 2018, as Central American caravans traveled through Mexico, the Washington Post published an article in which it is speculated that Tijuana is less dangerous for migrants because of Sinaloa's drug cartel control over the northwestern part of Mexico. The Washington Post argued that in contrast to the Zetas and Gulf cartels in control of northeastern Mexico, the Sinaloa cartel, once led by the now indicted Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, has not been particularly notorious for targeting migrants. By no means this implies Tijuana and other Baja California cities are excluded from violence waves and violent crime against migrants, but it was hypothesized that one of the main reasons of migrants, in this case asylum seekers, making the decision to arrive and establish in Tijuana was in part due to the violence towards them not being as palpable as in other cities and states. Since the publication of this article in 2018 Tijuana has experienced an exponential rise in violence and crimes against asylum seekers (Border Report, 2022). Drastic changes in the Sinaloa cartel as well as ongoing clashes between rival cartels such as Jalisco Nueva Generacion have contributed to this increase; however, Tijuana continues to be a top destination for migrants who hope to cross to the US.

Although we focused on Tijuana and Mexicali, it must be noted that migrants were and continue to be stranded, or have decided to establish, at each and every single one of the other border cities and face the same challenges. In addition, many entering through the Mexico-Guatemala border and seeking to request asylum in Mexico must remain in cities such as Tapachula or other areas in which the COMAR has offices. According to the bi-national legal organization Asylum Access, an asylum seeker must remain in the state where they first applied throughout the pendency of their claim, and must sign a form in the state’s COMAR office

weekly or biweekly to prove their presence. Violation of this regulation will lead COMAR to deem the application abandoned. Because most asylum seekers are near the southern and northern borders, this restriction is a significant burden. The offices of COMAR are located in Mexico City, Acayucan in the state of Veracruz, Tenosique in the state of Tabasco, Tapachula and Palenque in the state of Chiapas, Guadalajara in the state of Jalisco, Saltillo in the state of Coahuila, Monterrey in the state of Nuevo León, and Tijuana in the state of Baja California. The scarce presence of the COMAR and their locations being in states known to experience high levels of crime, poverty, and lack of infrastructure to accommodate large numbers of requests leaves asylum seekers vulnerable. Since asylum seekers must remain in the locations where they filed for asylum, they face the challenges of establishing in those states for long and unknown periods of time. As a result, cities such as Tapachulas have seen an exponential presence of individuals from countries across the world; individuals who live and work in these communities. Many of the migrants who end up in Tapachula are from Honduras, El Salvador and other Central American countries, but others started their journeys from countries such as Palestine, Cuba, Nigeria, Brazil and, recently, Ukraine (UNHCR). Adding an extra layer of complications for many that include but are not limited to communication barriers, lack of knowledge of the area, racism and discrimination.

### **1.5 The Migrant Experience: Interactions between Migrants and Local Mexican Communities**

The migrant experience is a complex one, it entails much more than following a route North. Migrants who make the decision to take the journey across Mexico come in contact with local Mexican communities and interact with them. These interactions, inevitably, have good and bad outcomes. Local Mexican communities have the power to influence migrants' experiences

and vice versa. This section focuses on the diverse outcomes of these interactions and their effects on both migrants and communities.

### **Violence:**

As stated throughout the report, migrants are constantly targets of violence from diverse actors, including organized crime, the state, local communities, and international organizations.

#### **- Organized Crime**

Organized crime has a history of perpetuating crimes and violence against migrants. In past sections we covered how the Zetas mass murdered migrants in Tamaulipas in 2010, but this is not an isolated incident. Several cartels control different areas of the nation and have left Mexico with stratospheric violence levels and death. The widespread presence of cartels in Mexico is depicted in figure 9 and we can observe that migrants crossing Mexico often find themselves in territory controlled by Zetas, Sinaloa, Pacific cartels as well as disputed territories. There is no area in Mexico left untouched by cartels. Los Zetas and the Sinaloa cartel control most of the nation; however, changes in leadership, rivalries, emergence of new groups, and conflict regarding territory control have brought instability to these two major cartels.

Cartels often commit crimes against migrants with the “tolerance or even involvement of certain public officials,” the InterAmerican Commission on Human Rights reported in 2013. These crimes are rarely reported, investigated, or punished. In 2019, the CNDH received 606 complaints of abuses against migrants, and the attorney general opened 72 investigations of crimes against migrants. An important observation that came up during this research and interviews is that cartels do not victimize migrants on their own. Compliance from state as well as international and humanitarian aid organizations, all institutions expected to protect the most vulnerable, contribute to the constant violence migrants face in Mexico. Corruption, impunity,

dismissal, and discrimination are all ways in which these organizations perpetuate violence and continue to allow migrants to be targets of cartels and organized crime.

Crimes against asylum seekers have been reported in all border cities across the US-Mexico border, although they were predominant along the Texas-Mexico border (Tamaulipas, Chihuahua). Criminal groups often target asylum seekers because they have no local ties or community and because they often have friends and family in the United States who can pay their ransom (Leurt Stephanie et al, 2018). Human Rights First tracked 1,001 incidents of violence against MPP asylum seekers in Mexico. In October 2019, a USIPC study, conducted between July and October 2019, found that one third of asylum seekers in Tijuana and Mexicali will likely be threatened with physical violence before their U.S. immigration court hearings. Furthermore, a February 2020 MSF report found that close to 80 percent of the people they treated in Nuevo Laredo were victims of violence during the first nine months of 2019, with 43.7 percent of them experiencing that violence within the week immediately after their arrival. Human Rights First provides essential data to understanding the violence and crimes against asylum seekers. Their data depicts that a higher number of reported crimes occurred in the city of Nuevo Laredo. In addition, the cities of Ciudad Juarez and Matamores are considered hotspots for criminal activity. However, as discussed earlier, Tijuana and Mexicali showed comparatively lower levels of violence. This being a reason why many migrants have arrived at these particular border cities. Figure 10 shows the border cities with the circle size representing the number of crimes against asylum seekers during Trump's MPP.

The most reported crimes by migrants include robbery, kidnapping and extortion, sexual assault, and murder. However, most crimes go unreported. Reasons for this lack of reporting include fear of retaliation and deportation, lack of knowledge of how and where to report, lack of

trust in local law enforcement and international organizations, and language barriers. Therefore, it is difficult to accurately estimate the extent of the crimes migrants are victims of and exactly who perpetrates them. Furthermore, Al Otro Lado's representative shared with us that Central American gangs such as MS-13 have made their way up to Mexico. Central American migrants fleeing their country due to extortion, kidnapping, etc., often find these same threats not only at the hands of Mexican cartels but from the same gangs and individuals they are fleeing from.

### *Sexual Assault and Gender-based Violence*

Women, unaccompanied children, elders, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and individuals with disabilities are at a higher of violence. Women of color, especially Black and Indigenous women, face higher risks of being victims of crime and systemic racism. Trans women are also more likely to face discrimination and violence. Mexico, a country with a history of sexism and homophobia in part due to its stretch relationship with Catholicism and machismo, faces an ongoing crisis of femicides; with Ciudad Juarez being an epicenter of it for decades. In August 2022 the INEGI estimated that more than 70% of 50.5 million Mexican women and girls aged over 15 have experienced some kind of violence, up four percentage points from the last time it ran the survey in 2016. Mexico is not a safe place for women and most crimes against women go impune. The intersectionality of not only being a woman but, for example, being a Black or Indigenous immigrant woman increases their vulnerability for discrimination and severe crimes, sexual assault being one of the most reported. Sexual violence, rape in specific, is perpetuated by cartel members but it is reported that they may also end up victimized by “coerced survival sex”. This refers to the action of being forced by, a smuggler, a police officer, migration official or another migrant to exchange sex for shelter, protection, food or the ability to proceed.

The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) and Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración (IMUMI) published a report on February 2022 which states that women asylum seekers, not only in border cities but across the country, faced high rates of gender-based violence by local communities and law enforcement, sexual assault and lack of basic resources. They were unable to access safe places to spend the night or private bathrooms. In this report the Lopez Obrador administration and other international organizations are criticized due to their inability to provide basic necessities for women asylum seekers as well as their failure to protect and investigate claims of sexual violence. Lack of translators to help migrants report these crimes is also heavily criticized since many do not speak Spanish; the lack of translators for ASL and Indigenous dialects is also highlighted.

*Kidnapping, Extortion, and Robbery*

Asylum seekers also face kidnapping, extortion, and robbery at high rates. In Mexican border cities Human Rights First has documented more than 500 cases of kidnapping or attempted kidnapping. According to UNHCR and Human Rights First, the kidnapping structure varies according to the geographic area and the criminal group's revenue generating activities in that area. Human and sex trafficking are also a prevalent problem and the reason behind many kidnappings. Overall, they identify two types of asylum seeker kidnappings: opportunistic kidnappings and systematic kidnappings.

Opportunistic kidnappings occur when an individual or group of people who are not part of an organized criminal group act independently to target an asylum seeker. Human Rights First reported in 2019 that in Ciudad Juarez this form of kidnapping occurs in ride share services when a driver realizes that their rider may be a migrant or asylum seeker. At that point, the driver will leave the pre-established route, and demand that the asylum seeker's family send money via



Venmo or a wire transfer. If not, the driver will threaten to turn the asylum seeker over to organized criminal groups. Although still dangerous, this form of kidnapping is not highly organized.

In other cities, such as Nuevo Laredo and Matamoros, kidnappings are more systematic. In Nuevo Laredo, the Cartel del Noreste kidnaps asylum seekers outside shelters, government offices, at bus stations, and in transit between those locations. A researcher for Human Rights First described a July 2019 case where members of the Cartel del Noreste entered the Nuevo Laredo INM office and began “openly abducting” asylum seekers who had just been returned to Mexico. Vision of Humanity reports that the ransom payments for kidnappings have been found to range from US\$1,500 to US\$10,000, with kidnapers usually demanding more if the victim has family in the United States. One estimate placed crime groups’ earnings from migrant kidnappings at US\$800 million over the past decade.

Furthermore, in our interview with La Casa Del Migrante, their representative explained that, in addition to law enforcement and criminal organizations preying on migrants, locals have also perpetuated crimes against migrants. Their representative explained that migrants have often shared that due to their undocumented status in the country and being unable to obtain jobs, they rely on jobs provided by locals. Leaving them without proper working conditions and vulnerable to exploitation and slavery.

Crimes against migrants encompass much more than what is covered in this section, they range from robbery to human trafficking and murder. Throughout the MPP period these were palpable in the asylum seeking population; nevertheless, they continue to happen and there is an imperative need to address them.

Figure 9: Cartel control in Mexico



Source: “El Mapa del Narco en Mexico y las Zonas de Influencia de Todos los Carteles [Mexican cartel’s zones of influence],” *RT*, February 26, 2014, <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/view/120930-mapa-narco-mexico-zonas-influencia-carteles>.

Figure 10: Crimes Against Asylum Seeker in MPP



Source: Author elaboration of Human Rights First data

**- State (police, military)**

The state, which includes law enforcement, contributes to the system violence migrants face in Mexico. They are often complicit in the crimes against migrants by allowing these

organizations to operate freely and not actively investigate and ignore claims and discourage individuals to report. However, they are also perpetrators of crimes against migrants. Reports by UNHCR, Human Rights First, and several news outlets state that law enforcement such as police and military rob, assault, torture, and blackmail migrant and asylum seeking populations at high rates. These abuses of power are even harder to report, track, and prosecute since seeking legal and international help to report is inaccessible for most migrants.

In addition, it is argued by scholars that the shift in Mexico's perception of migrants and asylum seekers from humanitarian crisis to security threat, which is referred to as the process of securitization of migration, has contributed to law enforcement and government officials to dehumanize migrants (Treviño-Rangel J, 2016). Process that has led to increasing levels of violence at the hands of the state as well as impunity. In 2019, President López Obrador deployed the National Guard, a branch of the military, for migration enforcement. The government says soldiers only support migration officials. However, in a leaked audio recording from 2019, a senior migration official told her team they were now "under the instruction and supervision of the National Guard." In January 2020, National Guard troops clashed violently with a caravan of migrants in Chiapas state. This is one of the many examples of the state being a source of violence to migrants.

In our interviews with NGOs, this was a topic that came up. Al Otro Lado's representative explained that many migrants seek help after being victims of crimes by law enforcement with torture, assault, and blackmail being the most predominant ones.

### **Interactions With Local Communities**

Local communities also play a role in the victimization of migrants. Although the anti-immigrant rhetoric usually states that migrants are a threat to national security, there is no

factual information that corroborates such assumptions. However, given the vulnerability of migrants, they are often the ones being targets of crimes by local communities and not necessarily vice-versa.

Most of those entering the southern border are Black, brown, and Indigenous people from Central America and the Caribbean who lack visas to enter Mexico. It is reported by the COMAR that nearly half of all asylum applicants in Mexico in 2021 were Haitians. The diversity of these new waves of migration and asylum seekers has exhibit the adverse reactions of various parts of the Mexican population that, as mentioned above, have been developing negative, racist and xenophobic attitudes towards migrants. Although Mexico has historically been a country of origin and transit of migrants, its new status of “migration hub” has ignited negative feelings and views regarding transiting and residing migrants.

Since the presence of migrant caravans starting in 2018, xenophobic and intolerant slogans targeting migrant caravans have manifested across the nation. A survey of public opinion shows that Mexicans have highly negative attitudes towards Central American migrants (Abundis, 2020). This indicates the need for the Mexican government to make a concerted effort to develop policies for the integration of migrants and refugees. Classism, colorism, racism, and xenophobia are not strangers to Mexico; while these have roots in colonization, it has been complicated for the nation to break free from them. These have presented themselves in the anti-immigrant sentiment among certain Mexican communities throughout the last years and have had significantly negative effects on migrant populations.

Along with negative views about migrants rooted in classism, colorism, and xenophobia, misinformation has also played a key role in the increasing anti-immigrant sentiment in Mexico. Local news outlets and social media have contributed to discriminatory and hateful practices by

local Mexican communities against migrants; particularly during the MPP period. Groups on Facebook such as “Tijuana against the migrant caravan” called on members to rise up in opposition to the Central American caravans settling in their city in February 2019. Local newspapers reported that days after the caravan’s arrival in Tijuana, groups, including some associated with the Facebook group, organized anti-immigrant rallies. On November 14, a violent confrontation erupted in Playas de Tijuana, during which people in the crowd were heard calling the caravan members “invaders.” Claudia Benassini, a researcher in digital media at La Salle University in Mexico City, told BBC News that fake news significantly affected the perception of migrants in Mexico. Misinformation regarding migrants assaulting law enforcement and carrying out criminal acts in local communities was what led to these rallies and confrontations. Extensive media coverage about asylum seekers at the border and transiting caravans using words as “mass exodus”, “invasion”, “crisis”, among others also fueled misinformation and has translated into increasing hostile interactions with local communities.

Also, due to the framing of Mexico’s role in the MPP, the Mexican public appears to be convinced about AMLO’s little to no involvement in the decision making process of it. This presents the question of whether the Mexican citizens are aware of what the MPP involves and its effects. The understanding of the MPP by local Mexican communities is essential since its perceptions towards it has the potential to influence their interactions with stranded and established migrants. The Washington Post along with Mexican newspaper Reforma conducted a poll in July 2019 among Mexican citizens and its results showed that 47 percent reported to be unaware of MPP. Of the respondents who were aware of the policy, 55 percent of surveyed Mexicans believed that the United States had imposed the policy unilaterally on Mexico. The survey showed that MPP was popular among Mexican respondents, with 59 percent agreeing

with the policy. The fact that 47% of those being surveyed did not have knowledge of the MPP is alarming since stranded migrants are potentially living in their cities and trying to integrate in their communities. If local populations are unaware of MPP, its effects, and the reason of thousands of asylum seekers being stranded and integrating into their communities, it can lead to negative sentiments towards them and discriminatory practices.

Lack of support of local communities adds to migrants' vulnerability since they are already being targets of violence by multiple actors. Their negative views can also contribute to the dehumanization of asylum seekers and law enforcement diminishing these populations' needs and crime reports. The implications of the rejection of asylum seekers are huge since they interact, and many hope to integrate, with locals on a daily basis. Discrimination by these creates a breach for peaceful, successful, and culturally rich exchanges between migrants and Mexican communities.

However, it is essential to point out that not every interaction between migrants and locals has been negative. The UNHCR published a compilation of several interviews with refugees who have successfully integrated in Mexican communities. These interviews narrate stories of refugees who have found safety and are rebuilding their lives with support of a relocation and local integration programme started by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, in 2016. They state that, as asylum claims soared to more than 190,000 over the five-year period, the programme has helped more than 10,000 refugees to start over in Mexico as entrepreneurs and in formal jobs with full benefits in factories, in retail, and as managers. The refugee integration programme is supported by Mexican federal and state governments, and more than 170 companies in Mexico, including Oxxo, rail freight firm PIMSA ferreteros, appliance maker

Mabe, and papermill GreenPaper. Many have found safety in Mexican territory and have established permanently with help of local communities, organizations and businesses.

Although there are many challenges to the integration of migrants in Mexican communities, it also presents an opportunity to develop policies in the economic, social, political, and human rights fields that guarantee and promote the respect and well-being of migrant communities in Mexico. Migrants bring many positive contributions to the communities they cross and integrate in. This is an opportunity for an exchange of ideas, cultures, etc., between migrants and local communities.

### **Financial**

Despite the popular belief that migrants do not contribute substantially to the Mexican community, their presence provides economic opportunities for the nation. First of all, even if they are undocumented and do not have a legal permit to work in Mexico, they still contribute to the work force. Migrants crossing Mexico contribute to the local economy throughout their journey and, in some cases, their establishment in local communities. The latest Migration and Development Brief 35 published by KNOMAD/World Bank hinted that the most likely explanation of the increase in remittances to Mexico in 2021 is the increase in transit migration. The report states that given the high costs of migration and the irregular status of migrants, remittances have increased. Aside from remittances, refugees working in Mexico are contributing to Mexico's economic growth which is predicted by the Central Bank to reach 4.8 per cent this year. Interactions between migrants and local communities are not only negative and violent. They are also playing an important role in Mexico's economy.

## **1.6 COVID-19 Pandemic**

The Covid-19 pandemic added an extra layer of uncertainty and complications to an already existing problem. Migrants stranded in Mexico were some of the most affected by this pandemic given their vulnerability and lack of help from both the US and Mexico.

### **Covid-19 in Mexico:**

According to the World Health Organization, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Mexico on 28 February 2020 and the first death on 19 March 2020. As of August of 2020, only 6 months after the first case, there were over 560,000 confirmed cases and over 60,480 confirmed deaths. At the time Mexico had one of the lowest testing rates in the world with a shocking three tests per 100,000 people. The WHO states that from January 2020 to November 2022, there have been 7,125,176 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 330,495 deaths in the nation.

By the end of March 2020, the Mexican government implemented a series of restrictions to reduce the levels of transmission. Schools, bars, restaurants, and non-essential businesses as well as factories were closed. Mexico was placed under lockdown just as most countries in the world. Movement was limited and social distancing encouraged but with President Lopez Obrador's insistence in the economic sector to reopen, the actual enforcement of such measures was more lenient than in many other countries (ACAPS Thematic report: Migration & COVID-19 in Mexico, 2020).

The Mexican government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic has been defined as "underwhelming" by health and financial experts (Sandin, L., 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic showed that Mexico was not prepared for a pandemic of such magnitude. Economic inequality exacerbated the public health crisis, with the most affluent being able to access testing and



healthcare while those in poverty struggled to find reliable testing and basic resources. This crisis had impacts on the already vulnerable migrant population.

### **Effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on migrants in Mexico**

There are three main aspects in which the Covid-19 pandemic impacted migrants and asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border and other areas:

1. Migrants were and continue to be more vulnerable to the spread of Covid-19 given their living conditions. With most living in overcrowded shelters, tent camps, or informal settlements, social distancing and basic hygiene and sanitation are extremely complicated. This combined with difficult access to healthcare and the exacerbation of economic and social inequalities in the country which makes it more difficult for migrants to access basic necessities. Humanitarian aid from the US was unable to reach them due to border closures.
2. Due to many migrants staying in Mexico undocumented, they often rely on informal labor. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, demand for this type of labor decreased and faced disruptions. Migrants faced lack of job opportunities and due to their undocumented status in the country they were not eligible for social protection programs.
3. Border closures especially impacted migrants, asylum seekers in particular, who fled situations of violence in their countries of origin. The pandemic also reinforced ideas and rhetoric pro-securitization of migration. Before the pandemic there was a connection already made between migration and a threat to national security; and the pandemic added an extra layer of fear due to migrants also seen

as a public health risk. Scholars expect this to have a longer term impact on socioeconomic inclusion and social cohesion.

In March 2020, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic both the US-Mexico border was closed as well as the courts responsible for MPP hearings. All MPP hearings across the border were suspended; however, from March through July some hearings took place which provided awaiting migrants hope. Only to DHS announcing the indefinite suspension of MPP on July 17, 2020. The closure of the border and suspension of court hearings brought asylum seekers extra challenges. If their court dates and waiting periods in Mexico were already uncertain, once most border services shut down, the hope to eventually receive asylum seemed to be even harder to reach. It was expected that individuals with pending MPP cases would have to wait up to three years in Mexico before the possibility of a hearing. In total, CBP subjected over 6,000 people to MPP following the suspension of hearings, sending them to Mexico to wait for an unknown period. During this time, MPP was almost entirely replaced by Title 42, with hundreds of thousands expelled under that policy during Trump's last months in office (American Immigration Council, 2021).

The complex situation and lack of answers provided by the US government, the worsening of the pandemic, the restrictions imposed by the Mexican government, the closure of borders, and indefinite suspension of MPP, led migrants to abandon all hope for their asylum requests to be heard and make the decision to either return to their country of origin or establish and request asylum in Mexico. This was a turning point for the MPP and returned asylum seekers.

Mexico's COMAR, the office in charge of processing asylum requests, did not completely shut down during the pandemic. Although their offices are not located throughout the

country and are severely understaffed, the COMAR tried its best to accommodate asylum procedures in a remote way. While the COMAR received thousands of asylum cases, they are still experiencing a backlog which continues to leave migrants stranded and uncertain about their future.

### **1.7 Conclusion**

### **1.8 Further Research**

Migrants affect and are affected by interactions with local communities throughout the different stages of their journey through Mexico. They face rejection, discrimination, and other forms of violence at the hands of multiple actors such as organized crime, the state, international organizations, and local communities. Their journey is not difficult and inhumane policies such as “Remain in Mexico” present extra challenges for asylum seekers which left them vulnerable in Mexico. However, migrants’ interactions with local communities are not all negative. They contribute to the local economy and many have successfully integrated into Mexican society. These interactions present an opportunity for cultural, financial, and social exchanges that will enrich Mexico. Further research is needed in order to look into the long lasting effects of MPP and the integration of migrants into local Mexican communities.

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