

INVESTING IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Changing Mexico-U.S. Migration Patterns and Opportunities for Sustainable Cooperation



By Andrew Selee, Silvia E. Giorguli-Saucedo,
Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, and Claudia Masferrer

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September 2019

Acknowledgments

This report reflects the substance of two discussions of the Study Group on Mexico-U.S. Migration, convened by El Colegio de México and the Migration Policy Institute (MPI). The first was held on November 29–30, 2018 in Mexico City, and the other on March 15–16, 2019 in Washington, DC. This report also benefited from subsequent comments by study group members on an earlier draft. However, it is not a consensus report and the findings and recommendations it presents do not necessarily reflect the views of all study group members. For a list of study group members who participated in these convenings, see the report's appendix.

The authors are deeply grateful to the study group members for their engaging participation and enriching contributions. Their policy insights and diverse areas of expertise were fundamental to the dialogue that informed this report.

Additionally, the authors thank MPI colleagues Michelle Mittelstadt and Lauren Shaw for reviewing and editing this report; Sara Staedicke for its layout; Andrea Tanco for her assistance in reviewing and editing the Spanish translation of this report; Jessica Bolter for assisting with background research; Lisa Dixon for support in convening the study group; and Carlyn Greenfield for reviewing sources and citations. They also thank Andrés Clarke Estrada for translating this report into Spanish.

This report and the Study Group on Mexico-U.S. Migration were made possible by a grant from Southern Methodist University's Mission Foods Texas-Mexico Center and by the support of Western Union and Rassini.

This report is also available in Spanish: www.migrationpolicy.org/research/migracion-mexico-estados-unidos-cooperacion-sostenible.

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Cover Design and Layout: Sara Staedicke, MPI
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Suggested citation: Selee, Andrew, Silvia E. Giorguli-Saucedo, Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, and Claudia Masferrer. 2019. *Investing in the Neighborhood: Changing Mexico-U.S. Migration Patterns and Opportunities for Sustainable Cooperation*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.



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Executive Summary

Over the past decade, migration flows between the United States and Mexico have changed dramatically. The migration relationship between the two countries was once dominated by irregular flows from Mexico to the United States, but today most Mexicans move to the United States legally. The overall population of Mexicans in the United States has also been shrinking since 2014, though at 11.3 million people in 2017, they still make up the largest immigrant group in the country and 3 percent of the overall population. At the same time, the population of U.S. citizens living in Mexico has grown to more than 700,000, making it the largest population of U.S. emigrants anywhere in the world. A large percentage of these U.S. citizens are children who were born in the United States, and many may face integration obstacles in Mexican schools and society, much as Mexican immigrant children often do in the United States.

Today, the largest migration flow between the two countries—and the most difficult to manage—is that of Central Americans heading north to the United States, with increasing numbers staying in Mexico along the way. Unlike the large numbers of Mexicans crossing the shared border in the late 1990s and early 2000s, most of whom were single, adult men, these Central Americans are mostly families and unaccompanied children, and many are seeking asylum. The large Central American flows through the region, which grew noticeably in late 2018 and early 2019, are accompanied by smaller but not insignificant migration from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and several Asian and African countries.

Many of the challenges that Mexico and the United States face around migration are surprisingly similar today.

But even as the migration landscape across the region has changed, and Mexico has increasingly become a destination as well as a transit country, policy has not always kept pace. Many of the challenges that Mexico and the United States face around migration are surprisingly similar today. Both have large numbers of each other's citizens living in their country and attending their schools, as well as immigrants from elsewhere, and they need to think proactively about how to best support the integration of immigrants into local communities. Their governments each have significant opportunities to engage with civil society and the private sector to ensure that integration works in favor of economic growth and successful social outcomes for the societies at large. And given the size of the U.S.-citizen population in Mexico and the Mexican-citizen population in the United States, there are important opportunities for U.S. and Mexican policymakers to learn from each other.

The current political moment may not seem propitious for real cooperation between the two federal governments. The sharp increase in mixed migration from Central America, and rising arrivals at the Mexico-U.S. border, have created deep tensions between the two governments, with the Trump administration threatening tariffs on Mexican goods in May and early June to force the Mexican government to ramp up immigration enforcement. But the divisive political rhetoric and threats obscure the degree to which the two countries are converging in terms of the real challenges—and real opportunities—they face in dealing with migration issues. Even today there is enormous space for engagement between local and state governments on both sides of the border, as there is for civil-society organizations, the business community, and even for many federal government agencies.

This is also the time to begin to visualize a different kind of binational policy that could reflect the real complementariness that exists between Mexico and the United States on migration issues, even if it may

be difficult to implement in the current environment. This pursuit of a new vision for policymaking, one grounded in the new migration realities in the region, led the Migration Policy Institute and El Colegio de México in late 2018 and early 2019 to convene a Study Group on Mexico-U.S. Migration. These discussions among policymakers, researchers, and representatives of civil society and the private sector informed the analysis of migration trends and policy options presented in this report.

Policy Options and Recommendations

- ***There is no way to effectively address regional mixed migration without a regional approach.*** As both Mexico and the United States face the challenge of managing large-scale mixed migration from Central America and elsewhere, U.S. policymakers would be wise to engage Mexico in ways that are mutually beneficial rather than seeking to impose unilateral measures that undermine cooperation, as has happened in recent months. These include working with the Mexican government to modernize and professionalize its migration and asylum institutions, while doing the same in the United States. And while cooperation between Mexico and the United States is paramount, broader regional cooperation is also vital to comprehensively addressing the various forces driving irregular migration.
- ***Mexico and the United States should share a common aim of replacing irregular flows with regular migration.*** Doing this effectively requires a mix of strategies in each country that include expanding existing legal pathways or creating new ones, reforming asylum systems, enhancing border control, and addressing the root causes of migration. It is unlikely that enforcement alone, even if strengthened in both countries, will dissuade irregular migration in a sustainable way, absent significant reforms to visa systems and robust protection mechanisms for those fleeing persecution and generalized violence.
- ***No policy area needs more urgent attention in both countries than asylum reform.*** Asylum seekers currently face long and growing application backlogs, stretching for months in Mexico and years in the United States. Reforming both asylum systems to enable timely decision-making would both ensure that those who qualify receive protection quickly and discourage the filing of less robust claims. Attempts to limit access to asylum (such as forcing those seeking asylum in the United States to wait in Mexico or metering at the border) are likely to backfire by strengthening smuggling networks and encouraging irregular crossings. And seeking to outsource responsibility for providing humanitarian protection to Mexico or other countries in the region is unlikely to result in either relief for those in need or deterrence of future migration. In Mexico, strengthening the asylum system requires at least tripling the relatively modest annual budget of the Mexican asylum agency (Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados, or COMAR). Meanwhile, in the United States, this would mean creating a much more efficient system, perhaps by allowing asylum officers to make the final decision in cases.
- ***Building effective institutions that can implement immigration policies matters.*** Mexico's National Migration Institute (Instituto Nacional de Migración, or INM) remains underfunded and its policies and infrastructure limited, with no dependable career path for agents and other staff, limited controls to prevent corruption, few clear protocols for key functions, and substandard detention facilities for those awaiting asylum or removal. While U.S. immigration agencies have received more funding than other federal law enforcement functions, their design in some respects still reflects a different era when most unauthorized immigrants were single, adult men from Mexico. Rethinking physical infrastructure for detention centers, career paths within border agencies, and the structure of ports of entry would help improve legal transit and commerce while responding more effectively to mixed flows of humanitarian and other migrants, and especially the needs of families and children traveling alone.
- ***It is time to build a truly 21st-century border.*** Both countries also have an interest in managing the shared border in a way that is binational and cooperative, something that has increasingly



been happening for many years. They have a joint interest in efficiently facilitating the regular movement of goods and people across the border, while preventing migrant smuggling, drug trafficking, and weapons smuggling. Building on the successes to date entails employing risk-management techniques effectively, expanding trusted traveler and shipper programs and pre-clearance programs, enhancing information-sharing efforts (including the integration of entry/exit data), and creating unified systems for cargo processing.

- ***Both countries should rethink their approach to employment-based immigration to create alternatives to irregular migration.*** For Mexico, regional employment-based visas that enable some Central Americans to work in the country's southern states are a start, but most labor needs are in the center and northern regions; the Mexican government may wish to expand this program or launch one that focuses on those regions, while ensuring fair wages and labor protections. In the United States, employment-based visas for agricultural and nonagricultural workers (H-2A and H-2B) have provided legal pathways for many Mexicans to work seasonally, but they have admitted far fewer Central Americans. One option to encourage employers in these demand-driven programs to request Central American workers is to create recruitment centers in the region. Future immigration reform efforts in the United States should also look seriously at alternative ways of creating employment-based visas open to Central American workers.
- ***Together, the U.S. and Mexican governments should make it a priority to identify, disrupt, and degrade large migrant smuggling organizations.*** This is especially the case for those that are engaged in human trafficking and those that are known to prey on migrants. In the United States, this may require direct policy guidance, such as a national security directive, that focuses priority attention on migrant smuggling networks.
- ***Supporting the development of the economies, governance, and institutional infrastructure of migrant origin countries is critical to addressing the root causes of migration.*** While U.S. and Mexican development priorities differ, identifying two or three common objectives could maximize impact in those areas. This could include supporting reform efforts for public security and governance or economic development initiatives in Central America, in cooperation with local partners. In Venezuela and Nicaragua, where political crises have given rise to large-scale emigration, this could mean strengthening democratic institutions so that the countries' citizens have a true say in the future of their governments.
- ***Both the United States and Mexico should strive to be welcoming societies to each other's nationals, as well as to immigrants from around the world.*** Regardless of the divisive nature of immigration policy debates, society as a whole benefits when newcomers are well-integrated in labor markets, school and health systems, and the public sphere. There are many opportunities for governments, civil society, and the private sector in Mexico and the United States to learn from each other's experiences and share policy ideas in fields such as education and workforce training. This is particularly the case since each country's largest immigrant group is the other's nationals.

These ideas can galvanize policymakers and the wider public in both the United States and Mexico to think differently about how migration patterns have changed and how to seize the growing range of possibilities for collaboration on migration issues. The opportunities for real, sustainable collaboration are immense, even if not all of them can be realized in the short term.

I. Introduction

The current moment, rife with divisive political rhetoric, may seem ill suited to efforts to deepen cooperation between Mexico and the United States on migration issues. Yet this obscures an important reality: these countries are converging in terms of the migration challenges—and opportunities—they



face. Even today, there is room for cross-border engagement at different levels of government, and for efforts to visualize a different kind of bilateral cooperation for the future.

To improve understanding of the changing migration landscape and begin to develop a shared vision for future cooperation, El Colegio de México and the Migration Policy Institute convened a Study Group on Mexico-U.S. Migration in late 2018 and early 2019. The group's members, a full list of whom can be found in the Appendix, include leading experts from government, academia, civil society, and the private sector. Their rich discussions of changing migration patterns and policy options for the management of migration between the two countries informed this report.

Even today, there is room for cross-border engagement at different levels of government, and for efforts to visualize a different kind of bilateral cooperation for the future.

The first part of this report explores the ways migration patterns between Mexico, the United States, and the broader region have shifted over the past decade. These data show dramatic changes that upend long-held assumptions on both sides of the border. The second part of the report lays out a series of policy ideas and recommendations for how the U.S. and Mexican governments could find common ground on migration issues, with a mix of options for immediate action and others that require a longer timeframe for implementation.

II. Shifting Migration Patterns

Migration trends between Mexico and the United States have changed considerably since 2010. Mexican migration, which once dominated the debate between the two countries, has dropped dramatically, while migration from the United States to Mexico has increased. And flows from Central America and other countries, both inside and outside the hemisphere, have become considerably more important in recent years. While most of these migrants are trying to reach the United States, they cross through Mexico and appear to be staying in Mexico in increasing numbers.

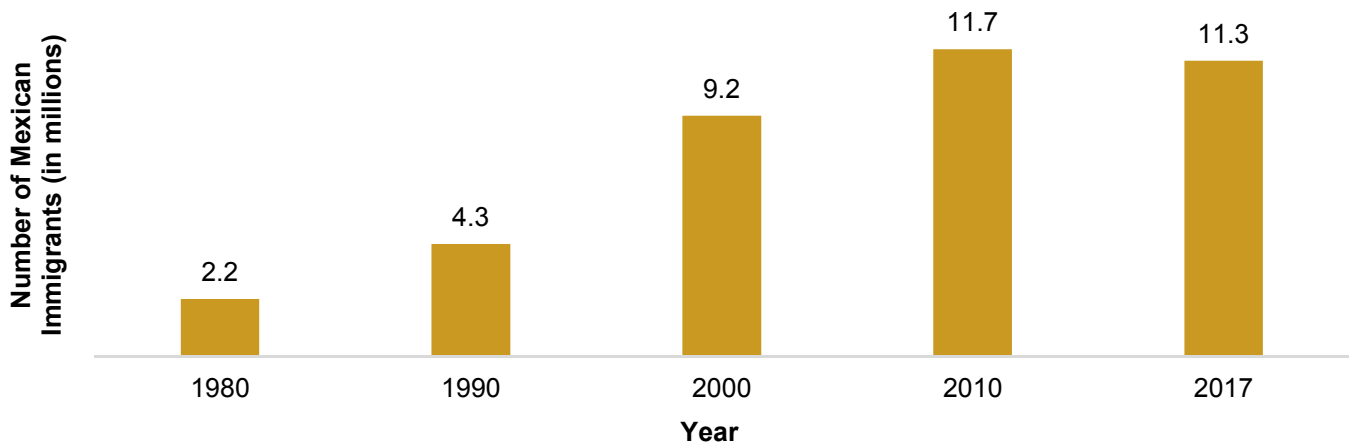
A. Mexican Migration to the United States

Having grown steadily in size since the 1980s, the Mexican immigrant population in the United States hit a turning point in 2010. Even as the total number of immigrants in the country continued to increase each year between 2010 and 2017, the Mexican immigrant population did not. The number of Mexicans in the United States first leveled out and then, in 2014, began to decline, falling from 11.7 million in 2010 to 11.3 million in 2017 (see Figure 1). This shift was particularly pronounced in the year between 2016 and 2017, when the number of Mexicans in the United States decreased by about 300,000.¹

¹ Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova, "Mexican Immigrants in the United States," *Migration Information Source*, October 11, 2018, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/mexican-immigrants-united-states.



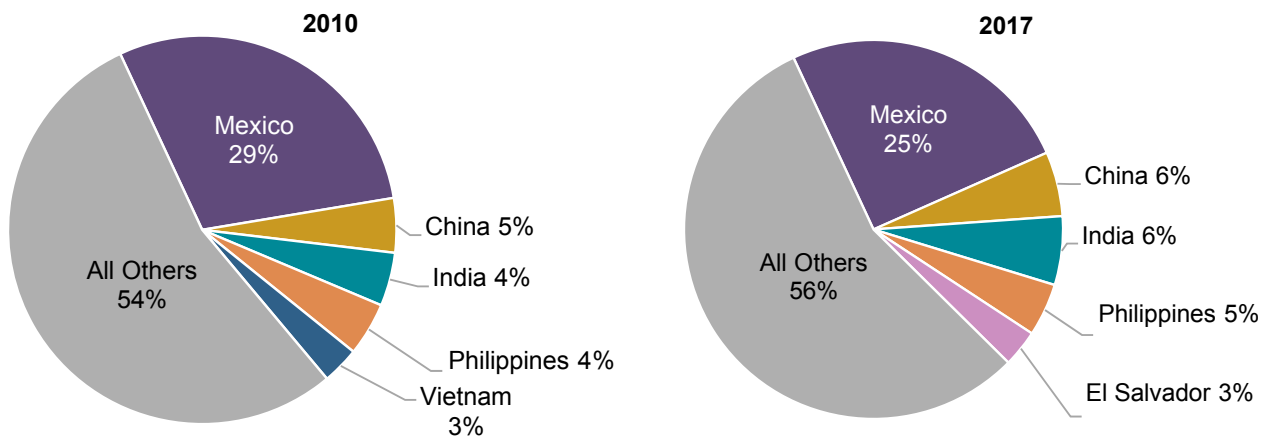
Figure 1. Mexican Immigrant Population in the United States, 1980–2017



Sources: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) calculations of U.S. Census Bureau 2010 and 2017 American Community Surveys (ACS); Campbell J. Gibson and Kay Jung, “Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850–2000” (Working Paper no. 81, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, February 2006), www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0081/twps0081.pdf.

Despite this decrease in population size, Mexicans remain the largest single foreign-born group in the United States, accounting for 25 percent of the 44.5 million immigrants in the country as of 2017 (see Figure 2). Many Mexican immigrants have deep roots in the country, with 89 percent having entered before 2010, compared to 79 percent of the total immigrant population. And more than half of Mexican immigrants in the United States entered before 2000.

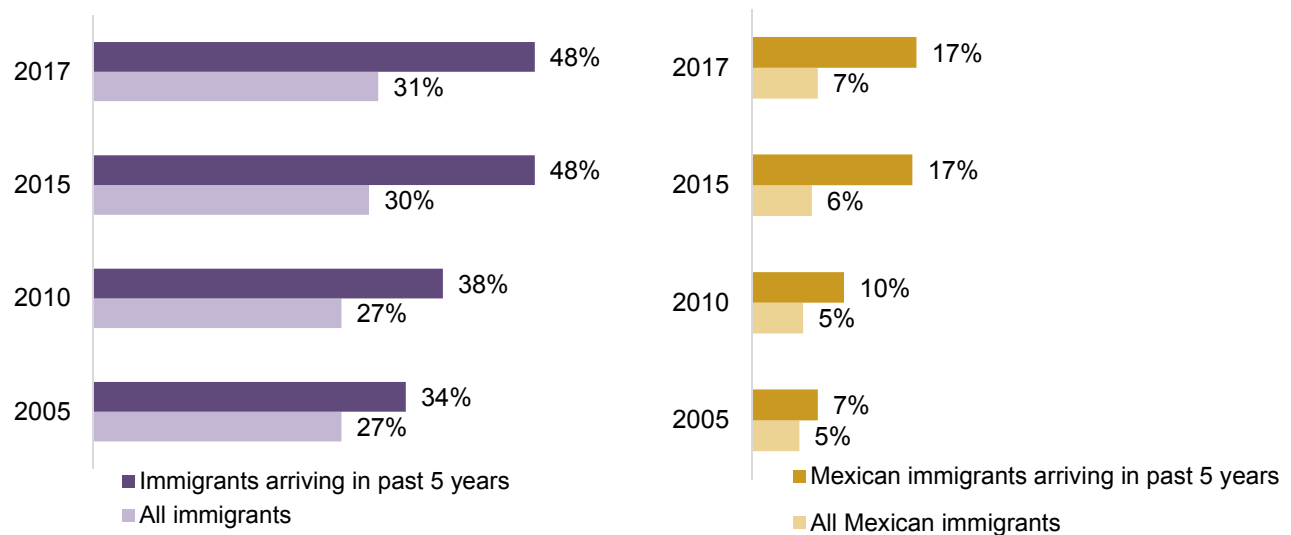
Figure 2. Immigrant Population in the United States, by Country of Birth, 2010 and 2017



Source: MPI calculations based on ACS data for 2010 and 2017.

Recent Mexican immigrants—those who entered in the past five years—are much more likely to have a college education than those who arrived in previous years.² In 2017, 17 percent of recent Mexican immigrants were college educated, up from 10 percent in 2010 and well above the 7 percent of the overall Mexican immigrant population with a college degree in 2017 (see Figure 3). This suggests the human capital profile of Mexican immigrants is changing, as it is for the overall immigrant population.

Figure 3. Share of Immigrant Adults (ages 25 and older) with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher, by Country of Birth and Years of U.S. Residence, 2005–17



Source: MPI calculations based on ACS data for 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2017.

These changes in the Mexican immigrant population in the United States are closely linked to decreasing flows from Mexico to the United States—and, notably, it appears that larger shares of Mexican immigrants are entering the country through legal rather than illegal channels. These trends are also shaped by return migration to Mexico (discussed in the next section). In 2013, India and China surpassed Mexico as the top origin countries for recent arrivals, and more recent data show the trend continuing: Approximately 150,000 Mexican migrants arrived in the United States in 2016, compared to 175,000 Indian migrants and 160,000 migrants from China/Hong Kong.³

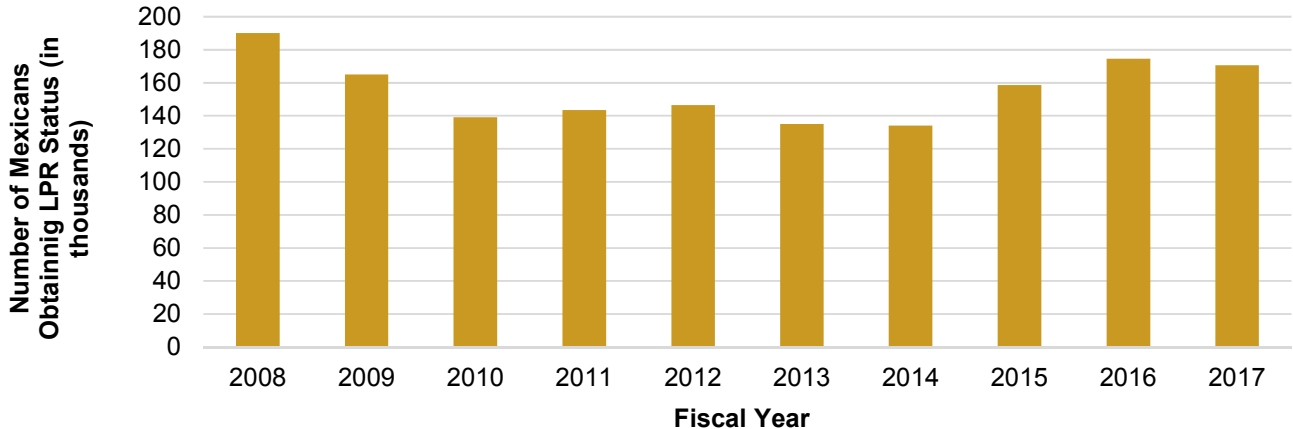
The number of Mexicans obtaining lawful permanent resident (LPR) status, also known as a green card, provides another window into Mexican legal migration flows to the United States, though they include not only new arrivals but also immigrants who adjust status from inside the country. After falling somewhat since fiscal year (FY) 2008, the number of Mexicans obtaining green cards began to increase again in FY 2015 (see Figure 4). By FY 2016, the number of Mexicans becoming LPRs had reached 175,000, approaching FY 2008 levels, though this number dipped slightly to 171,000 in FY 2017.

² Ariel G. Ruiz Soto and Andrew Selee, *A Profile of Highly Skilled Mexican Immigrants in Texas and the United States* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2019), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/highly-skilled-mexican-immigrants-texas-united-states.

³ Eric B. Jensen, Anthony Knapp, C. Peter Borsella, and Kathleen Nestor, “The Place-of-Birth Composition of Immigrants to the United States: 2000 to 2013” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Population Association of America, San Diego, CA, April 30–May 2, 2015), <https://paa2015.princeton.edu/abstracts/150959>; Jie Zong, Jeanne Batalova, and Jeffrey Hallock, “Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States,” *Migration Information Source*, February 8, 2018, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states-7.



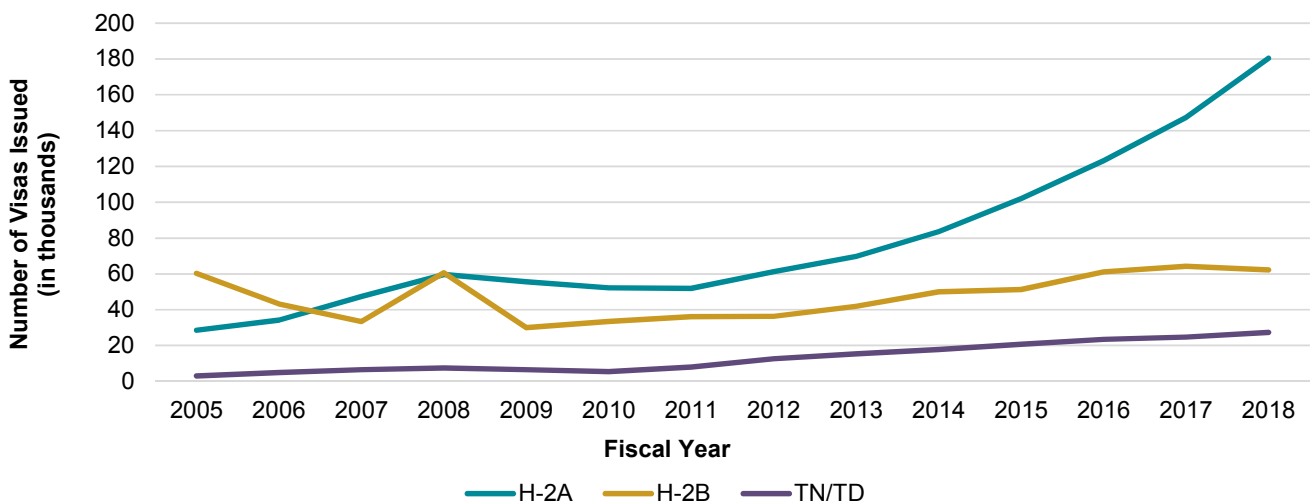
Figure 4. Number of Mexicans Obtaining Lawful Permanent Resident Status, FY 2008–17



Note: These data are for U.S. federal government fiscal years, which run from October 1 through September 30.
Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), “Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2017,” accessed November 21, 2018, www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2017.

Among temporary Mexican immigrants, most came through one of three visa categories: H-2A (agricultural workers); H-2B (nonagricultural workers); and TN and TD (NAFTA visas for Canadian and Mexican professional workers). The number of Mexicans issued these visa types has expanded significantly over the past ten years, most notably for H-2A visas (see Figure 5). In fact, Mexicans accounted for 74 percent of H-2B visas issued in FY 2018 and more than 90 percent of H-2A, TN, and TD visas.⁴

Figure 5. Select Nonimmigrant Visas Issued to Mexicans, By Visa Class, FY 2005–18

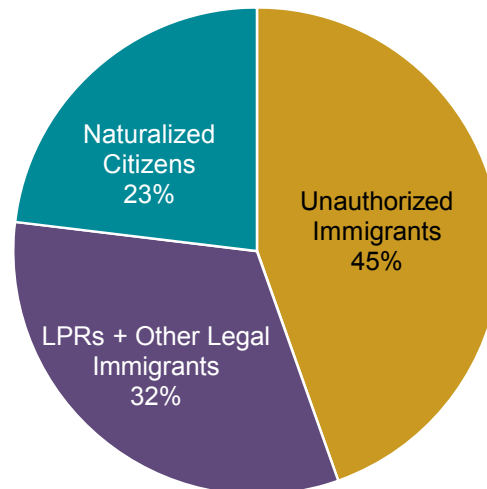


Note: These data are for U.S. federal government fiscal years, which run from October 1 through September 30.
Source: U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, “Nonimmigrant Visa Issuances by Visa Class and by Nationality, FY1997-2018,” accessed April 11, 2019, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/legal/visa-law0/visa-statistics/nonimmigrant-visa-statistics.html>.

⁴ Migration Policy Institute (MPI) calculations based on data from the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, “Nonimmigrant Visa Issuances by Visa Class and by Nationality, FY1997-2018,” accessed April 11, 2019, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/legal/visa-law0/visa-statistics/nonimmigrant-visa-statistics.html>.

The majority of Mexican immigrants in the United States are in the country lawfully. As of 2016, 23 percent of Mexican immigrants were naturalized citizens, 32 percent held a green card or a temporary visa, and 45 percent were unauthorized (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Mexican Immigrant Population in the United States, by Immigration Status, 2012–16



LPRs = Lawful permanent residents.

Sources: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the 2012–16 ACS pooled and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), drawing on a unique methodology for assigning legal status to noncitizens developed in consultation with James Bachmeier of Temple University and Jennifer Van Hook of The Pennsylvania State University, Population Research Institute.

As of April 2019, roughly 536,000 Mexican unauthorized immigrants had legal protection from deportation and work authorization under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.⁵ Among unauthorized immigrants who meet all DACA program criteria, those from Mexico participate at the highest rate; MPI estimates that approximately 821,000 Mexicans were immediately eligible as of August 2018, of whom 68 percent were DACA recipients.⁶

While there are no accurate statistics on the number of immigrants who successfully enter the United States without authorization, data show that the number of Mexican immigrants apprehended by the U.S. Border Patrol has declined dramatically since 2007, reaching levels not seen since the early 1970s.⁷ And even with the large rise in recent years in overall apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexico border, apprehensions of Mexican nationals remain historically low, at less than 200,000 annually since FY 2015.⁸ A 2017 study by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) calculates that ever fewer unauthorized immigrants succeed in entering the United States through the southwest border, so the total number of illegal

5 U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), “Approximate Active DACA Recipients: Country of Birth As of April 30, 2019,” accessed August 28, 2019, www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/USCIS/Resources/Reports%20and%20Studies/Immigration%20Forms%20Data/All%20Form%20Types/DACA/Approximate_Active_DACA_Recipients_Demographics_-_Apr_30_2019.pdf.

6 MPI Migration Data Hub, “Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Data Tools,” accessed November 21, 2018, www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-daca-profiles.

7 Jens Manuel Krogstad and Jeffrey S. Passel, “U.S. Border Apprehensions of Mexicans Fall to Historic Lows,” Pew Research Center Fact Tank, December 30, 2014, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/30/u-s-border-apprehensions-of-mexicans-fall-to-historic-lows/.

8 U.S. Border Patrol, “U.S. Border Patrol Apprehensions From Mexico and Other Than Mexico (FY 2000 - FY 2018),” accessed September 10, 2019, www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2019-Mar/bp-total-apps-other-mexico-fy2000-fy2018.pdf.



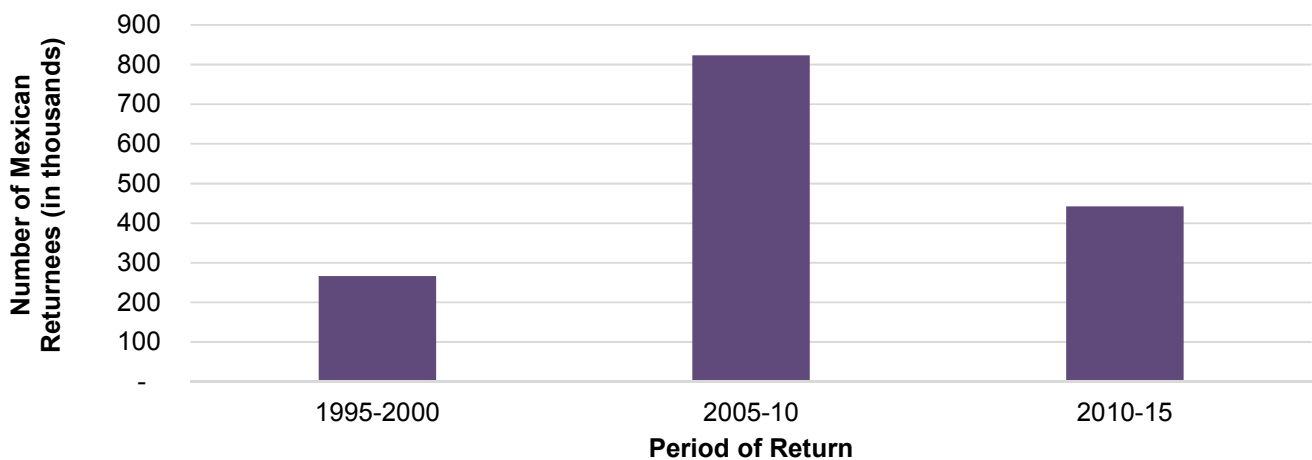
crossings by Mexican migrants has probably dropped even quicker than apprehension statistics suggest.⁹ Today, 62 percent of all unauthorized immigrants (Mexicans and others) have lived in the United States for a decade or more.¹⁰

Overall, Mexican irregular migration to the United States has slowed while the number of Mexicans to receive green cards and temporary worker visas each year has increased. This shift has been accompanied by an increase in education levels among recent arrivals. But while Mexicans are still the largest foreign-born population in the United States, their share of all immigrants is smaller than in past decades, and especially among recent arrivals, as other countries have overtaken Mexico as the top origin country.

B. Mexican Returnees and U.S. Citizens in Mexico

As migration from Mexico to the United States has been decreasing, more Mexican immigrants (and their U.S.-born children) are returning to Mexico, according to analyses of Mexican census data.¹¹ Between 2005 and 2010, more than 820,000 Mexican nationals returned to Mexico and another 443,000 between 2010 and 2015. By comparison, 266,000 Mexicans returned between 1995 and 2000 (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Mexican Returnees, by Period of Return, 1995–2015



Source: Claudia Masferrer, “Return Migration from the U.S. to Mexico: New Challenges of an Old Phenomenon,” in *Migration Challenges in North America: People, Labor, Borders & Security*, ed. Canadian Diversity (Montreal: Association for Canadian Studies, 2018), www.ciim.ca/img/boutiquePDF/canadiandiversity-vol15-no2-2018-9jf51.pdf.

Research suggests that voluntary and involuntary return migration to Mexico is driven by a mix of factors, including the slow recovery of the U.S. economy after the Great Recession, increased optimism about the Mexican economy, and stricter immigration policies in the U.S. interior and at the southwest border. Deportations of Mexicans from the United States decreased gradually from 602,000 in FY 2009 to 207,000 in FY 2015, remaining relatively constant thereafter with an annual average of about 200,000

⁹ U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), *Efforts by DHS to Estimate Southwest Border Security Between Ports of Entry* (Washington, DC: DHS Office of Immigration Statistics, 2017), www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/17_0914_estimates-of-border-security.pdf.

¹⁰ MPI Data Hub, “Profile of the Unauthorized Population: United States,” accessed September 11, 2019, www.migrationpolicy.org/data/unauthorized-immigrant-population/state/US.

¹¹ Claudia Masferrer, “Return Migration from the U.S. to Mexico: New Challenges of an Old Phenomenon,” in *Migration Challenges in North America: People, Labor, Borders & Security*, ed. Canadian Diversity (Montreal: Association for Canadian Studies, 2018), www.ciim.ca/img/boutiquePDF/canadiandiversity-vol15-no2-2018-9jf51.pdf.



through FY 2018.¹² Some analysts, drawing on Mexican survey data, contend that most Mexicans who returned from the United States prior to 2015 left voluntarily, with more than half of returnees citing family reunification as their motivation to return.¹³ At the same time, the Mexican- and U.S.-citizen relatives of deportees and voluntary returnees may also decide to leave the United States and rejoin them in Mexico.

Among Mexican adults repatriated from the United States, decision-making about the future also appears to be changing. According to analyses of representative survey data, the share of Mexican adult deportees indicating they intended to re-enter the United States plummeted from 95 percent in 2005 to 49 percent in 2015. By comparison, the share of those intending to remain in Mexico increased from 5 percent in 2005 to 47 percent in 2015.¹⁴

At the same time, the U.S.-born population in Mexico has grown rapidly, in part as a result of Mexican parents returning to the country with their U.S.-born children. This phenomenon highlights new forms of transnational families: Although the majority of U.S.-born children in Mexico (age 18 and younger) live with two Mexican-born parents, one-third were recorded as living separate from one or both parents in 2015.¹⁵

The U.S.-born population in Mexico has grown rapidly, in part as a result of Mexican parents returning to the country with their U.S.-born children.

Mexican census data show immigration of U.S.-born persons increasing significantly in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The number of U.S.-born recent immigrants in Mexico (that is, those who were living in the United States five years prior to the survey) peaked in 2005–10 at approximately 356,000, before decreasing to about 218,000 in 2010–15, though this remains above pre-2000 levels. Among the broader population moving from the United States to Mexico, children make up most of the U.S.-born recent immigrant population in each time period, while most recent Mexican returnees are adults (see Figure 8).

12 Mexican Interior Ministry (SEGOB), “Boletín Mensual de Estadísticas Migratorias, 2008–18,” accessed September 10, 2019, http://portales.segob.gob.mx/es/PoliticaMigratoria/Boletines_Estadisticos.

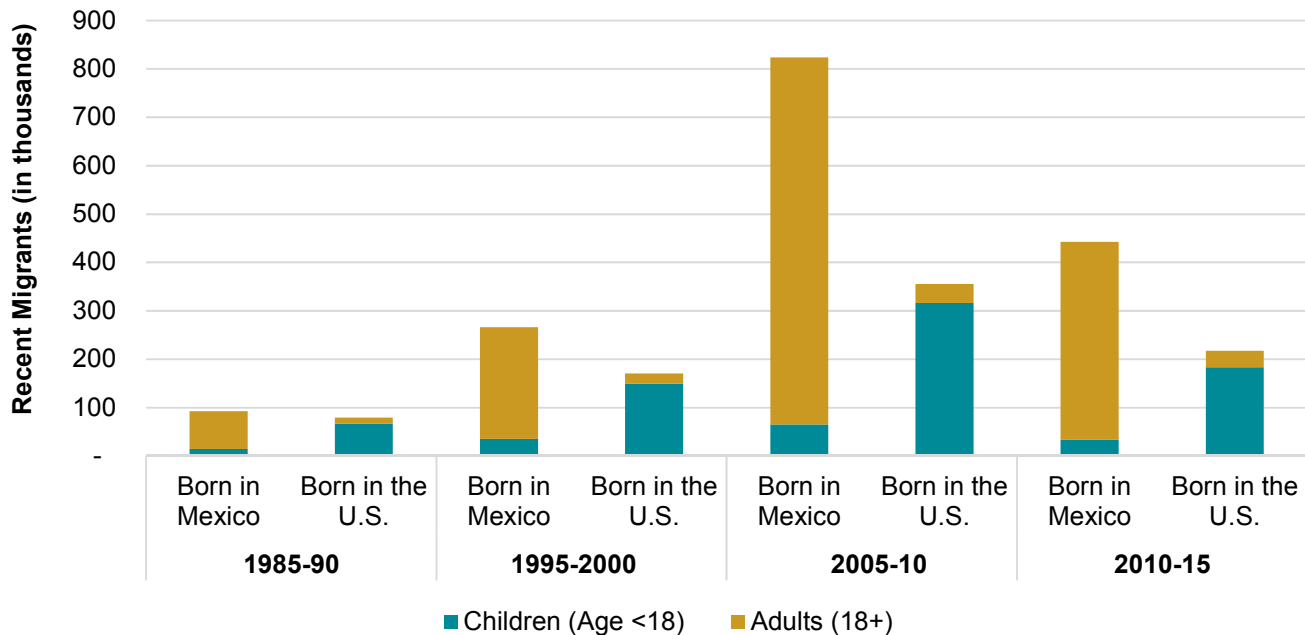
13 Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, *More Mexicans Leaving than Coming to the U.S.* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2015), www.pewhispanic.org/2015/11/19/more-mexicans-leaving-than-coming-to-the-u-s/.

14 To analyze the demographic profile of repatriated Mexican adults, MPI researchers applied results from the Mexican Northern Border Migration Survey (Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte de México) to official repatriation data collected by Mexico’s Interior Ministry. See Ryan Schultheis and Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, *A Revolving Door No More? A Statistical Profile of Mexican Adults Repatriated from the United States* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2017), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/revolving-door-no-more-statistical-profile-mexican-adults-repatriated-united-states.

15 Claudia Masferrer, Erin Hamilton, and Nicole Denier, “Immigrants in Their Parental Homeland: Half a Million U.S.-Born Minors Settle throughout Mexico,” *Demography* 56, no. 4 (2019): 1453–61.



Figure 8. Recent Mexican Returnees and U.S.-Born Immigrants* in Mexico, by Period of Arrival, 1985–2015



* Drawing on Mexican census data, “recent returnees” and “recent immigrants” refer to persons living in Mexico at the time of the survey who were recorded as living in the United States five years prior.

Source: Silvia E. Giorguli-Saucedo, Víctor M. García Guerrero, and Claudia Masferrer, *A Migration System in the Making: Demographic Dynamics and Migration Policies in North America and the Northern Triangle of Central America* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2016), https://cedua.colmex.mx/images/_micrositios/amsitm/amsitm-policy-paper.pdf.

These flows of U.S.-born migrants have added to the stock of immigrants in Mexico. The immigrant population in the country doubled between 2000 and 2013, rising from 521,000 to 1.1 million.¹⁶ By 2015, approximately 740,000 U.S.-born migrants lived in Mexico, representing 73 percent of the country’s 1 million immigrants.¹⁷ Yet, according to U.S. State Department calculations, the U.S.-born immigrant population in Mexico may be much higher.¹⁸ Among U.S.-born children living in Mexico, an estimated 30,000 lack Mexican identity documents—something that can complicate their access to schools and other services.¹⁹

Undoubtedly, given the current levels of migration from the United States to Mexico, reintegrating returning Mexicans and their U.S.-born children will continue to be a critical challenge for both governments, as well as the growing network of civil-society organizations dedicated to migrant issues. Efforts to implement existing government programs uniformly across Mexico and to enhance the capacity of civil-society services can make positive contributions in the short term. While many reintegration

16 Silvia E. Giorguli-Saucedo, Víctor M. García Guerrero, and Claudia Masferrer, *A Migration System in the Making: Demographic Dynamics and Migration Policies in North America and the Northern Triangle of Central America* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, October 2016), https://cedua.colmex.mx/images/_micrositios/amsitm/amsitm-policy-paper.pdf.

17 Mexican National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), “Tabulados de la Encuesta Intercensal 2015,” updated October 24, 2016, www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/programas/intercensal/2015/tabulados/04_migracion.xls.

18 The U.S. State Department lists 1.5 million U.S. citizens living in Mexico on its website, and embassy officials have commented that the real number may be 1.5 to 1.8 million, though it is hard to verify these figures. See U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Relations with Mexico,” updated April 1, 2019, www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-mexico/; remarks by former U.S. Ambassador Roberta Jacobson at the MPI event “Vanishing Frontiers: The Forces Driving Mexico and the United States Together,” Washington, DC, June 5, 2018, www.migrationpolicy.org/events/vanishing-frontiers-forces-driving-mexico-and-united-states-together.

19 U.S. Embassy in Mexico, “Niños Migrantes son Prioridad para Consulado,” updated August 12, 2015, <https://mx.usembassy.gov/es/ninos-migrantes-son-prioridad-para-consulado/>.



programs currently focus on helping returnees find employment, over the long term, these services should seek to address a wider range of needs, including by supporting education attainment and psychosocial wellbeing.²⁰

C. *Migration from Central America to Mexico and the United States*

Central American migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to Mexico and the United States is hardly new, but current emigration levels have fundamentally reshaped regional flows. A mixture of extreme violence, poverty, drought, poor coffee harvests, and worsening political conditions (in Honduras and to some extent in Guatemala) have created powerful push factors driving Central Americans to leave their countries. U.S. immigration laws and the desire to reunify with family already in the United States have provided powerful pull factors, and policy missteps in the United States and Mexico have exacerbated these forces. However, the interplay of push and pull factors has manifested differently in each of these three countries, with Guatemalans and Hondurans dominating migration flows in FY 2018–19.²¹

At the U.S. southwest border, apprehensions of Mexican migrants by U.S. authorities have fallen over the past ten years. Meanwhile, in FY 2012 apprehensions of migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras began to rise significantly, reaching record levels in FY 2019 (see Figure 9). Through the first eleven months of FY 2019, migrants from these countries were apprehended at the border approximately 590,000 times, compared to 238,000 in all of FY 2014, the previous peak in Central American flows.

*The interplay of push and pull factors has manifested differently
in each of these three countries, with Guatemalans and
Hondurans dominating migration flows in FY 2018–19.*

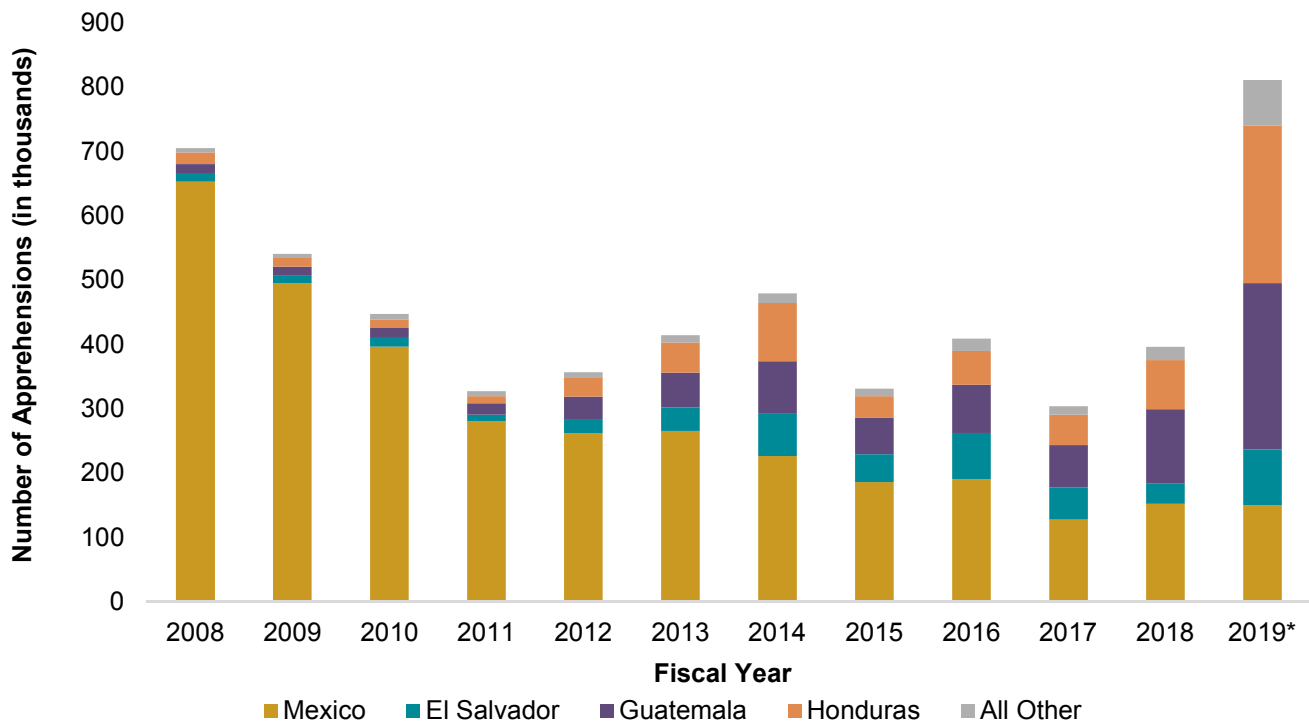
Although Hondurans represented the largest share of U.S. apprehensions of migrants from these three Central American countries in FY 2014, Guatemalans overtook them in FY 2015. Notably, apprehensions of migrants from these three countries have surpassed those of Mexicans every year since FY 2014, except FY 2015.

20 Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, Rodrigo Dominguez-Villegas, Luis Argueta, and Randy Capps, *Sustainable Reintegration: Strategies for Migrants Returning to Mexico and Central America* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2019), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/sustainable-reintegration-migrants-mexico-central-america.

21 Randy Capps et al., *From Control to Crisis: Changing Trends and Policies Reshaping U.S.-Mexico Border Enforcement* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2019), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/changing-trends-policies-reshaping-us-mexico-border-enforcement.



Figure 9. U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehensions, by Citizenship, FY 2008–19*



* Figures for FY 2019 reflect apprehensions occurring from October 2018 through August 2019.

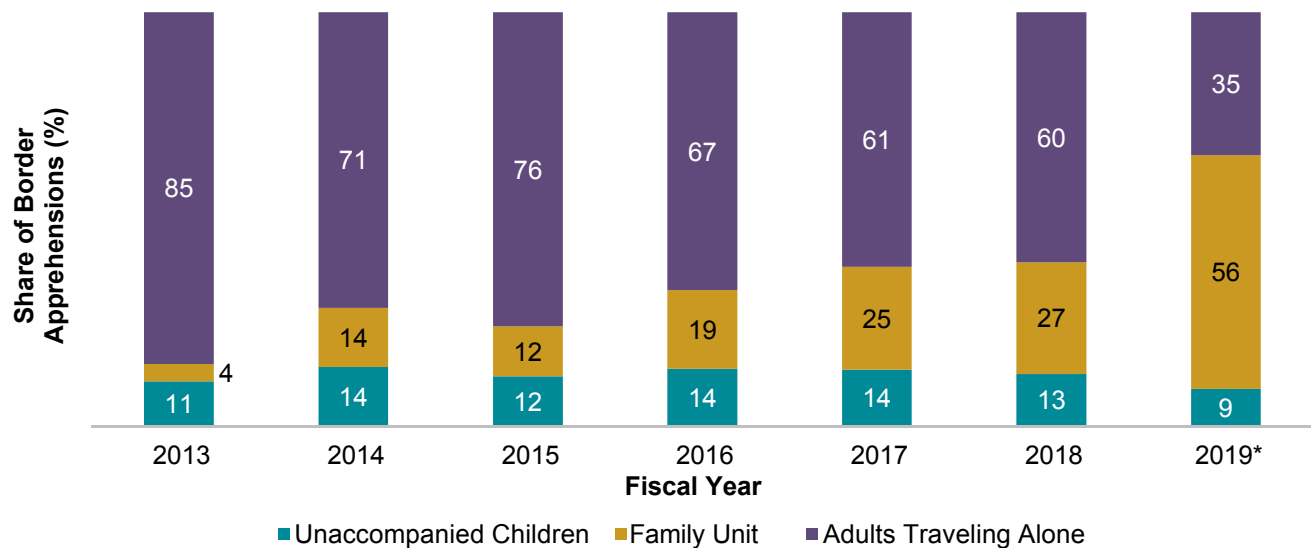
Notes: These data are for U.S. federal government fiscal years, which run from October 1 through September 30. Migrants who are considered inadmissible when they present themselves at U.S. ports of entry without prior authorization to enter are not included in apprehension totals.

Sources: U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), “U.S. Border Patrol Nationwide Apprehensions by Citizenship and Sector, FY 2007-18,” accessed August 28, 2019, www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2019-Mar/BP%20Apps%20by%20Sector%20and%20Citizenship%20FY07-FY18.pdf; CBP, “U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehensions by Sector Fiscal Year 2019,” updated September 9, 2019, www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration/usbp-sw-border-apprehensions.

The profile of migrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border has also changed significantly. Compared to previous Mexican migration flows, which were predominantly made up of single adult men, Central American migration is more mixed, with families and unaccompanied children comprising larger shares. In FY 2013, 4 percent of apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexico border were of family units,²² compared to 56 percent in the first eleven months of FY 2019 (see Figure 10). Except for in FY 2015—the last time apprehensions of Mexicans were higher than those of Central Americans—the family share of apprehensions has steadily increased. At the same time, unaccompanied children have remained a relatively constant share of apprehensions, between 11 and 14 percent through FY 2018.

22 “Family units” is an official term used by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to identify the number of individuals (either a child under 18 years old, parent, or legal guardian) apprehended with a family member by the U.S. Border Patrol. For more information, see CBP, “Southwest Border Migration FY 2019,” updated September 9, 2019, www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration.

Figure 10. Share of U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehensions by Category, FY 2013-19*



* Figures for FY 2019 reflect apprehensions occurring from October 2018 through August 2019. *Notes:* These data are for U.S. federal government fiscal years, which run from October 1 through September 30. Migrants who are considered inadmissible when they present themselves at U.S. ports of entry without prior authorization to enter are not included in apprehension totals.

Sources: MPI calculations based on number and type of apprehensions by fiscal year using data from U.S. Border Patrol, “Total Illegal Alien Apprehensions by Month,” accessed August 28, 2019, www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2019-Mar/bp-total-monthly-apps-sector-area-fy2018.pdf; U.S. Border Patrol, “Total Family Unit Apprehensions by Month,” accessed August 28, 2019, www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2019-Mar/bp-total-monthly-family-units-sector-fy13-fy18.pdf; U.S. Border Patrol, “Total Unaccompanied Alien Children (0-17) Apprehensions by Month,” accessed August 28, 2019, www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2019-Mar/bp-total-monthly-uacs-sector-fy2010-fy2018.pdf; CBP, “Southwest Border Migration FY 2019,” updated September 9, 2019, www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration.

Renewed migration from Central America has forced the Mexican government to confront its policies on migration for the first time in many years, including immigration enforcement and its procedures for asylum and complementary protection. After the arrival of large numbers of Central Americans, including many unaccompanied children, the Mexican government implemented the Southern Border Program (Programa Frontera Sur) in 2014 to promote orderly border crossings and facilitate legal temporary migration from neighboring countries, overall enhancing security and migration management.²³

As a result of persistent migration and the program’s implementation, Mexican apprehensions of migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras rose to 173,000 in FY 2015, surpassing the 134,000 such apprehensions by U.S. immigration authorities that year (see Figure 11). While Mexican apprehensions of migrants from these countries have since decreased, they remain higher than they were prior to the implementation of the Southern Border Program. Since April 2019, added migration controls implemented by Mexico—in response to U.S. pressure and shifts in public opinion in Mexico—have again dramatically increased apprehensions.²⁴ Overall, Mexico has been responsible for 35 percent of the 2.6

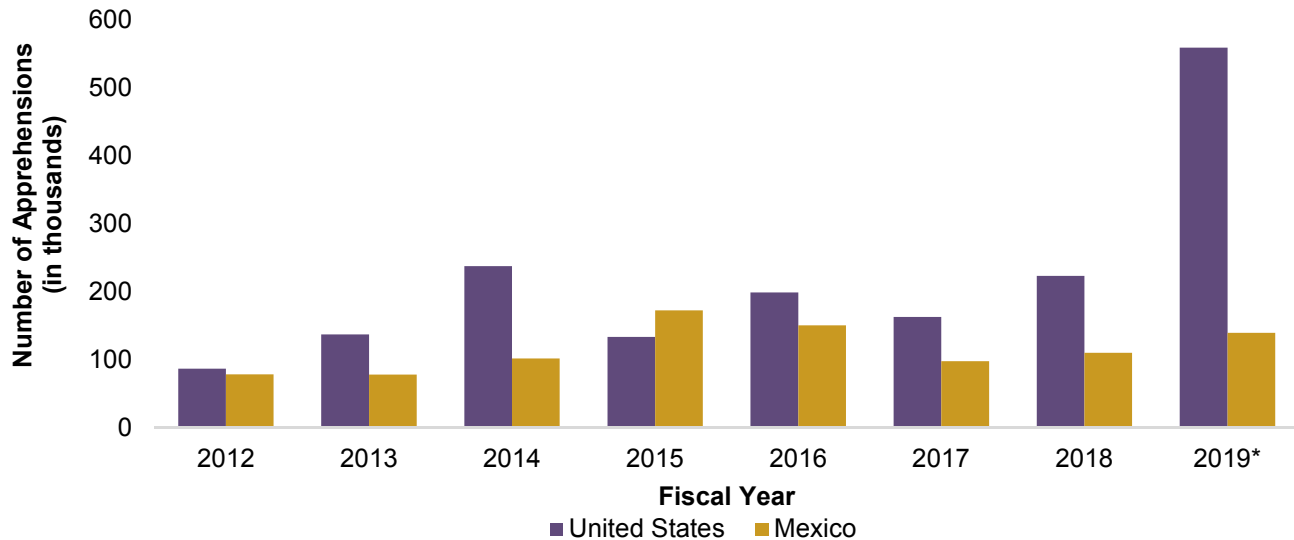
23 Victoria Rietig and Rodrigo Dominguez-Villegas, “Changing Landscape Prompts Mexico’s Emergence as Migration Manager,” *Migration Information Source*, December 10, 2014, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/top-10-2014-issue-8-changing-landscape-prompts-mexicos-emergence-migration-manager.

24 Santiago Pérez and Catherine Lucey, “Trump Praises Mexico Amid Record Detention of Migrants,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 1, 2019, www.wsj.com/articles/mexico-detains-record-number-of-migrants-following-deal-with-u-s-11562017847; Kevin Sieff and Scott Clement, “Unauthorized Immigrants Face Public Backlash in Mexico, Survey Finds,” *Washington Post*, July 17, 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/world/the-americas/unauthorized-immigrants-face-public-backlash-in-mexico-survey-finds/2019/07/16/f7fc5d12-a75e-11e9-a3a6-ab670962db05_story.html.



million apprehensions of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans by U.S. and Mexican immigration authorities from FY 2012 through the first ten months of FY 2019.

Figure 11. U.S. and Mexican Apprehensions of Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran Migrants, FY 2010–19*



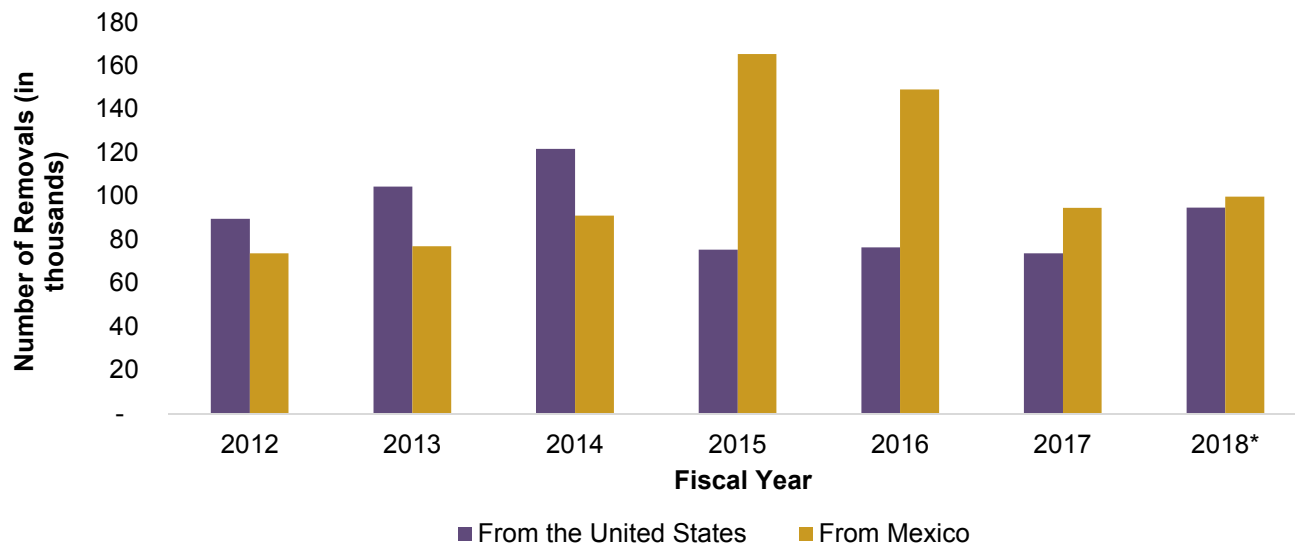
* U.S. and Mexican figures for FY 2019 cover October 2018 through July 2019.

Note: Mexico's apprehension data are reported by calendar year but have been rearranged to align with the U.S. fiscal year for comparison purposes. U.S. federal government fiscal years run from October 1 through September 30.

Sources: MPI calculations using data from CBP, "U.S. Border Patrol Nationwide Apprehensions by Citizenship and Sector, FY 2007-18"; CBP, "U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehensions by Sector Fiscal Year 2019"; Mexican Interior Ministry (SEGOB), "Boletín Mensual de Estadísticas Migratorias, 2011–19," accessed September 10, 2019, http://portales.segob.gob.mx/es/PoliticaMigratoria/Boletines_Estadisticos.

Although the United States apprehends Central American migrants at a higher rate than Mexico, Mexico has carried out more removals of these migrants at the Mexico-Guatemala border and in the interior since FY 2015 (see Figure 12). Combined removals from both countries reached nearly 241,000 in FY 2015, the year in which removals from Mexico overtook those from the United States, before falling to approximately 195,000 in FY 2018. Over the seven-year period between FY 2012 and FY 2018, Mexico was responsible for 54 percent of the 1.4 million total removals of migrants to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras by U.S. and Mexican authorities.

Figure 12. Removals from the United States and Mexico to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, FY 2012–18*



* Pending the publication of consolidated removal data by DHS for FY 2018, MPI has approximated U.S. removals for that period based on data provided by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which include a small number of returns made by ICE and do not include a small number of removals by CBP. Figures for FY 2012 through FY 2018 do not include U.S. “returns” which are considered voluntary requests by migrants to be returned, as opposed to removals which are compulsory orders by U.S. immigration authorities. *Note:* Mexico’s removal data are reported by calendar year but have been rearranged to align with the U.S. fiscal year for comparison purposes. U.S. federal government fiscal years run from October 1 through September 30.

Sources: MPI calculations using data from DHS, “Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2017”; ICE, *Fiscal Year 2018 ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations Report* (Washington, DC: ICE, 2018), www.ice.gov/doclib/about/offices/ero/pdf/eroFY2018Report.pdf. SEGOB, “Boletín Mensual de Estadísticas Migratorias, 2011–19.”

Both Mexico and the United States have also seen significant increases in requests for asylum by Central Americans. Compounding the effects of ongoing regional violence and insecurity, emerging push factors such as severe drought and political instability have exacerbated emigration pressures and contributed to dramatic increases in asylum requests in the absence of other legal migration mechanisms.²⁵ In FY 2018, U.S. immigration authorities conducted nearly 63,000 credible-fear interviews with migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—a key proxy of intentions to seek asylum—representing a 21 percent increase compared to FY 2017. Approximately 30,000 migrants from these countries had a credible-fear interview in the first six months of FY 2019, compared to 28,000 in the same period of FY 2018.²⁶ Given the recording-setting number of apprehensions in the summer months of 2019, it is likely that credible-fear interviews and, consequently, asylum applications in FY 2019 will surpass previous levels.

Meanwhile, asylum claims by Central American migrants in Mexico have ballooned in recent years. Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans filed approximately 1,000 asylum claims in calendar year 2013, rising to more than 21,000 in 2018 (see Figure 13). And in the first eight months of 2019, Mexican authorities received approximately 32,000 asylum requests from nationals of these three countries—

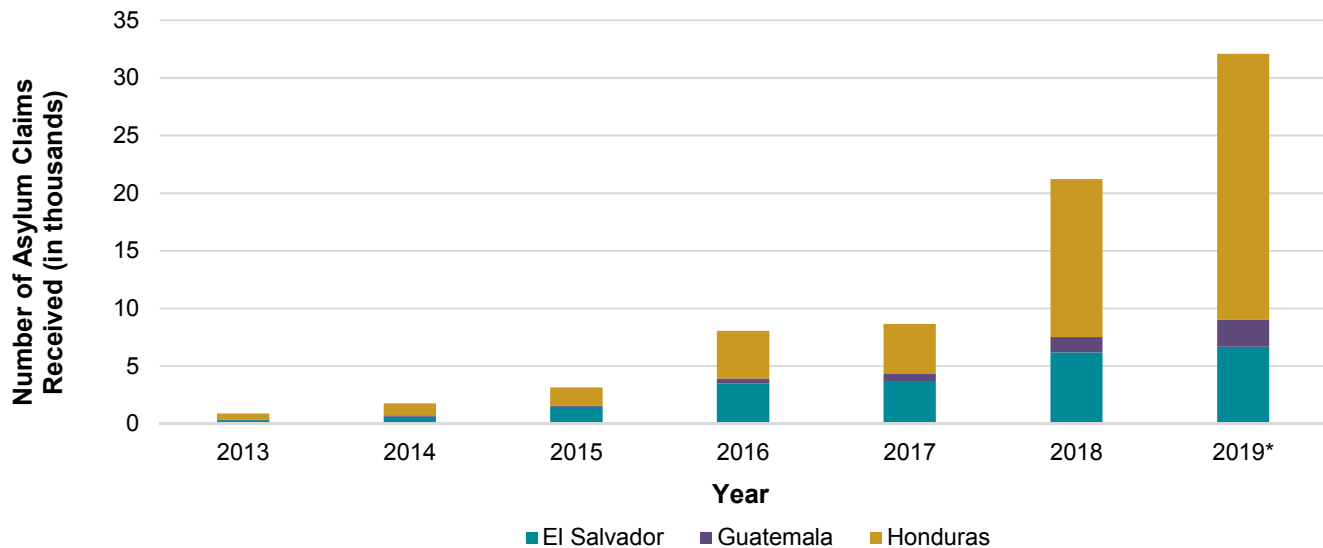
25 For a detailed description of changes in push and pull factors leading to increases in asylum petitions in the United States and Mexico, see Capps et al., *From Control to Crisis*.

26 MPI calculations based on data from USCIS, “Monthly Credible Fear Top Five Nationalities Received, Fiscal Year 2019,” accessed August 29, 2019, www.uscis.gov/outreach/asylum-division-quarterly-stakeholder-meeting-10; USCIS, “Monthly Credible Fear Top Five Nationalities Received, Fiscal Year 2018,” accessed August 29, 2019, www.uscis.gov/outreach/asylum-division-quarterly-stakeholder-meeting-9; USCIS “Monthly Credible Fear Top Five Nationalities Received, Fiscal Year 2017,” accessed August 29, 2019, www.uscis.gov/outreach/asylum-division-quarterly-stakeholder-meeting-8.



already surpassing the total number for all countries in 2018; officials project 80,000 total petitions will be filed by the end of the year.²⁷

Figure 13. Asylum Claims Submitted to the Mexican Refugee Commission by Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran Migrants, 2013–19*



* Asylum claims in Mexico are reported by calendar year. Figures for 2019 are year to date figures that reflect asylum claims made from January 2019 through August 2019.

Sources: Mexican Refugee Commission (COMAR), “Estadísticas 2013 - 2017,” accessed April 11, 2019, www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/290340/ESTADISTICAS_2013_A_4TO_TRIMESTRE_2017.pdf; COMAR, “Reporte Cierre de Agosto 2019,” updated September 4, 2019, www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/490723/REPORTE_CIERRE_DE_AGOSTO2019.pdf.

The asylum systems of both Mexico and the United States have been unable to keep up with the growing number of requests. Cases are not resolved for long periods of time—years in the United States and months in Mexico—producing neither relief for those in need of protection nor deterrence of illegitimate claims. As of June 2019, approximately 350,000 asylum cases waited unresolved in U.S. immigration courts.²⁸ In Mexico, 80 percent of all asylum cases submitted to the Mexican Refugee Commission (Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados, or COMAR) in 2018 remained unresolved at the year’s end.²⁹

Grant rates for Central Americans’ asylum claims in U.S. immigration courts decreased moderately in FY 2018 compared to FY 2016.³⁰ The decrease was most significant for Guatemalans, falling from a grant rate of 31 percent in FY 2016 to 18 percent in FY 2018. The grant rates decreased less for Salvadorans (from 25 in FY 2016 to 23 percent in FY 2018) and for Hondurans (from 25 to 20 percent).

27 SEGOB, “Estadísticas de la Coordinación General de la Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados,” accessed August 28, 2019, www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/474982/INFORME PRESIDENCIA.pdf.

28 Testimony of Kevin McAleenan, Acting Homeland Security Secretary, before the Senate Judiciary Committee, *The Secure and Protect Act: A Legislative Fix to the Crisis at the Southwest Border*, 116th Cong., 1st sess., June 11, 2019, www.judiciary.senate.gov/meetings/the-secure-and-protect-act-a-legislative-fix-to-the-crisis-at-the-southwest-border.

29 Mexican Refugee Commission (COMAR), “Reporte General de Solicitudes (Casos y Personas) al 31 de Diciembre y Registro de Resoluciones a Diciembre 2018,” accessed April 11, 2019, www.scribd.com/document/397230462/Reporte-Comar-a-Diciembre-2018.

30 MPI calculations based on data from the U.S. Department of Justice, “Executive Office for Immigration Review Adjudication Statistics,” updated October 24, 2018, www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1107366/download; Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC), “Asylum Decisions by Custody, Representation, Nationality, Location, Month and Year, Outcome and More,” accessed August 29, 2019, <https://trac.syr.edu/phptools/immigration/asylum/>. MPI calculates asylum grant rates by dividing granted cases by the sum of granted and denied cases. Cases that were abandoned or withdrawn are not considered in the calculation of grant rates given that they were not resolved.

In addition to asylum, the Mexican government also grants complementary protection to migrants who do not qualify for asylum but would be at risk of harm if returned to their countries of origin, and Mexican asylum law generally takes a broader interpretation of the reasons for granting asylum and complementary protection.³¹ The share of applicants for protection who received either asylum or complementary protection was 81 percent among those whose cases were completed from January through September 2018 (and 71 percent among asylum seekers from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras).³² Because large shares of asylum cases are still pending or have been abandoned or withdrawn, however, these recognition rates do not paint a complete picture of the extent to which migrants seeking humanitarian protection in Mexico receive it.

These heightened pressures on the asylum systems of both Mexico and the United States have challenged their abilities to adjudicate petitions fairly and efficiently, and raised concerns about how this is affecting vulnerable groups.³³ Of special concern is the limited capacity of the Mexican asylum system to protect minors in accordance with the law, and the U.S. system's failures to adapt to the specific needs of families and children traveling alone.

These heightened pressures on the asylum systems of both Mexico and the United States have challenged their abilities to adjudicate petitions fairly and efficiently.

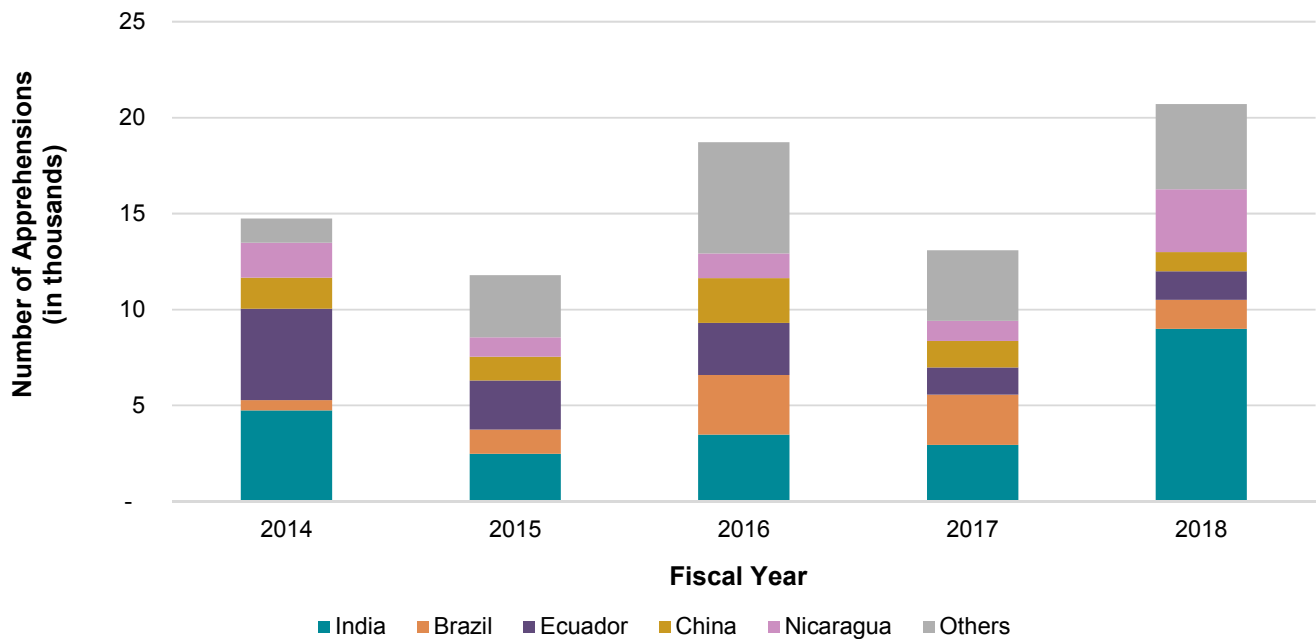
D. Other Migrants at the U.S.-Mexico Border

Other migrants constitute a small, but growing part of the flow at the U.S.-Mexico border. From FY 2014 to FY 2018, migrants from countries other than Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras represented between 3 and 5 percent of U.S. apprehensions, but approximately 9 percent in the first eleven months of FY 2019.³⁴ The composition of these flows has changed year to year, but most recently, the top nationalities have been India, Brazil, Ecuador, China, and Nicaragua (see Figure 14).

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- 31 As a signatory of the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, Mexico considers generalized violence and internal conflicts, among other criteria, when considering these cases. See Mexican Foreign Ministry (SRE), "Lineamientos para Atender Solicitudes de Asilo y Refugio," updated July 2016, <https://extranet.sre.gob.mx/images/stories/asilo/asilo2016.pdf>; *Ley Sobre Refugiados, Protección Complementaria y Asilo Político*, enacted January 27, 2011 and reformed October 30, 2014, www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/211049/08_Ley_sobre_Refugiados_Proteccion_Complementaria_y_Asilo_Politico.pdf.
- 32 COMAR, *Boletín Estadístico de Solicitantes de Refugio en México 2018* (Mexico City: SEGOB, 2018), www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/427549/COMAR2018.pdf.
- 33 On Mexico, see Rodrigo Dominguez-Villegas, *Strengthening Mexico's Protection of Central America Unaccompanied Minors in Transit* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2017), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/strengthening-mexicos-protection-central-american-unaccompanied-minors-transit. On the United States, see Doris Meissner, Faye Hipsman, and T. Alexander Aleinikoff, *The U.S. Asylum System in Crisis: Charting a Way Forward* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2018), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/us-asylum-system-crisis-charting-way-forward.
- 34 MPI calculations based on data from CBP, "U.S. Border Patrol Nationwide Apprehensions by Citizenship and Sector, FY 2007-18," accessed August 28, 2019, www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2019-Mar/BP%20Apps%20by%20Sector%20and%20Citizenship%20FY07-FY18.pdf; CBP, "U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehensions by Sector Fiscal Year 2019," updated September 9, 2019, www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration/usbp-sw-border-apprehensions.



Figure 14. U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehensions of Migrants Not from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras, by Citizenship, FY 2014–18



Note: These data are for U.S. federal government fiscal years, which run from October 1 through September 30.

Source: MPI calculations based on data from CBP, “U.S. Border Patrol Nationwide Apprehensions by Citizenship and Sector, FY 2007-18.”

Unauthorized migrants from outside the hemisphere are the subject of considerable attention from U.S. and Mexican authorities. This is largely because of concerns about the potential, no matter how slight, of terrorist infiltration, and the complex criminal smuggling networks that often lie behind these movements, but also because of their growing weight in the overall flow. The U.S. Acting Secretary of Homeland Security has made several visits to Central American countries to discuss this issue, and the Mexican government has also begun making it harder for migrants from other countries to obtain transit documents.³⁵

Of particular note is the number of Venezuelans arriving in Mexico on work visas or to seek asylum due to political conflict and the almost complete collapse of the Venezuelan economy.

From within the Americas, Mexico has seen migration from Cuba, Haiti, and Venezuela evolve in recent years. Of particular note is the number of Venezuelans arriving in Mexico on work visas or to seek asylum due to political conflict and the almost complete collapse of the Venezuelan economy. Though roughly

³⁵ Elida Moreno, “U.S. Urges Colombia and Central America to Help Stem Migration,” Reuters, August 22, 2019, <https://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKCN1VC2FQ>; Alberto Pradilla, “Migrantes Africanos Varados en Tapachula, Chiapas, Acusan Que No Les Dan Soluciones para Ir Hacia EU,” Animal Político, September 4, 2019, www.animalpolitico.com/2019/09/migrantes-africanos-varados-chiapas-trayecto-eu/.



80 percent of Venezuelan emigrants have fled to other Latin American countries, the United Nations estimates that there are more than 46,000 in Mexico, most having arrived since 2015.³⁶

Similarly, the number of Venezuelans in the United States has increased rapidly from 256,000 in 2015 to 351,000 in 2017.³⁷ But so far there is little evidence of Venezuelans trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border illegally; in FY 2018, there were only 62 apprehensions of Venezuelans at the U.S.-Mexico border.³⁸ However, this remains a trend worth watching.

III. Changing Policy Options

The mental maps of policymakers and the public on both sides of the Mexico-U.S. border continue to be dominated by the specter of large-scale, irregular migration from Mexico to the United States. Yet, the situation on the ground has changed. Both countries are contending with rising mixed migration flows of humanitarian and economic migrants from Central America. Most are trying to reach the United States, but some stay in Mexico. Meanwhile, both Mexico and the United States host large numbers of each other's nationals. This changing migration landscape demands a critical rethink of long-held assumptions and should create new opportunities for cooperation.

A. Structural Convergence with Political Divergence

Mexico and the United States face increasingly parallel migration challenges. Both receive migrants and asylum seekers in large numbers, and both have each other's nationals as the leading immigrant group. Moreover, both are dealing with some of the same political stresses and strains and face important policy choices about how immigrants come into the country and how they are integrated into society.

At the same time, crucial differences remain. While Mexico has a large U.S.-born population, many of them have Mexican heritage and are less immediately visible in Mexican society. Meanwhile, Mexico remains more a country of transit than a receiving country for unauthorized migrants and asylum seekers from Central America and elsewhere in the hemisphere, although this may be changing gradually. Mexico also has a much larger diaspora in the United States than vice versa, and many of the Mexicans living north of the border are without legal status, putting them in a far more precarious situation than most Americans in Mexico.

So, although Mexico and the United States do not find themselves on completely parallel tracks, they are far closer than at any of time in recent history, and far more so than most observers in either country realize. Nationalist politics obscure some of these growing similarities. In particular, the U.S. political discussion often does little to differentiate between Mexican and Central American irregular flows, and the current administration has often preferred unilateral measures, such as tariff threats, a border wall, and metering,³⁹ to address what could and should be common challenges with shared solutions. At the same time, Mexico has yet to come to terms fully with the fact that the country is becoming a migrant-receiving society, with all the possibilities and challenges that this entails. This lack of awareness in Mexico plays out in a failure to fully address the challenges of irregular migration and the increasing demands on the asylum system—major policy issues that require long-term solutions—or the integration needs of the growing foreign-born population.

36 Estimates by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), based on Mexican government data, see UNHCR and IOM, "Plataforma de Coordinación para Refugiados y Migrantes Venezolanos," updated August 5, 2019, <https://r4v.info/es/situations/platform>.

37 MPI calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau data from the 2015 and 2017 American Community Surveys (ACS).

38 CBP, "U.S. Border Patrol Nationwide Apprehensions by Citizenship and Sector, FY 2007-18."

39 Capps et al., *From Control to Crisis*.



As time goes on, and the challenges they wrestle with become increasingly similar, Mexico and the United States will each need to find ways to deal with these issues internally and with each other if they have any hope of managing shared migration flows effectively. Indeed, there is no way to address flows between the two countries without adopting a regional approach. This section offers policy options that may help U.S. and Mexican policymakers rethink these issues, to the benefit of both countries.

B. Options for Creating and Expanding Legal Pathways

Cracking down on unwanted migration is one way to address these mixed flows, but experience demonstrates that no amount of enforcement will succeed in lowering the numbers if not accompanied by efforts to fix chronically backlogged asylum systems and provide some labor-based legal pathways as alternatives to irregular movement.

I. Fixing Asylum Systems

Many migrants fleeing El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (and increasingly Nicaragua and Venezuela) are doing so to seek protection from persecution or generalized violence. Timely decisions about asylum are both far more fair to those who have valid protection claims and the best deterrent against misuse by those who would file claims that have little chance of succeeding in order to remain in the country while their cases sit in a growing backlog.

*Timely decisions about asylum are both far more fair to those
who have valid protection claims and the best deterrent
against misuse.*

Asylum protections should be broad, but decisions need to be made efficiently. In the case of Mexico, this means a significant increase in the personnel and capacity of COMAR so that it can process decisions within 45 business days, as its mandate requires. COMAR will need to increase its budget by three to four times to meet this mandate, but given the small size of its current budget—roughly 1.2 million dollars—this is a relatively minimal investment for a large return in terms of policy effectiveness, fairness, and deterrence.⁴⁰ Mexican authorities may also want to consider granting asylum applicants greater flexibility to move within the country, rather than requiring them to remain in the zone where they first applied for asylum; this could ease pressure on communities and service providers in areas of the country where large numbers of claims are filed, and enable asylum seekers to move to areas that are safer and have better labor market prospects, facilitating their self-sufficiency.

While the Mexican government will have to lead these changes, the U.S. government could provide much needed support either directly or through the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, as doing so could have significant advantages in terms of taking pressure off the U.S. asylum system.

Meanwhile, the United States needs to make its own asylum processes timelier and far more efficient.⁴¹ One way to do this is to allow asylum officers to make the first decision on claims, rather than sending all cases to the overburdened immigration courts. This would vastly speed up asylum processing, allowing

40 Lizbeth Diaz and Delphine Schrank, “Mexico’s Refugee Agency Turns to U.N. Amid Asylum Surge, Funding Cuts,” Reuters, May 21, 2019, www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-mexico/mexicos-tiny-refugee-agency-turns-to-un-amid-asylum-surge-funding-cuts-idUSKCN1SS06N. For additional detail on previous annual budgets for COMAR, see Fundar, *Análisis del Paquete Económico 2019* (Mexico City: Fundar, 2019), 11, <http://fundar.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Ana%CC%81lisis-del-Paquete-Econo%CC%81mico-2019.pdf>.

41 For an in-depth discussion of these issues in the U.S. context and recommended improvements, see Meissner, Hipsman, and Aleinikoff, *The U.S. Asylum System in Crisis*.



decisions to be taken within a few months instead of a few years. This change would both provide relief more quickly to those in need and erase perverse incentives to file unfounded claim.

This change would need to be accompanied by an important investment in asylum officers and perhaps immigration judges to handle appeals. The U.S. government should also consider returning to the broader definition of asylum that existed prior to 2018, which was based on years of jurisprudence that had expanded the grounds of asylum to deal with the challenges of gang persecution and domestic violence in circumstances where the state is incapable or unwilling to protect its own citizens. Fairness and deterrence are not at odds with each other; in fact, they are complementary.

For asylum seekers awaiting decisions on their applications, U.S. authorities should consider the merits of a robust case management system.⁴² Such a system promises to ensure they appear on their appointed hearing dates and understand immigration court proceedings. It would also be far less expensive and psychologically damaging than long-term detention. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has experimented with this type of supervision in the past, including most notably with the Family Case Management Program for Central American families, which achieved a 99 percent compliance rate.⁴³ Because past programs have generally been limited in scale, research should be conducted to make sure that this approach is effective when applied broadly.

DHS might also consider rethinking the design of its border installations, which were designed for a different era when the flow was primarily of Mexican men. Creating physical infrastructure that can collocate U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), ICE, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) asylum officers, possibly immigration judges, and nongovernmental organizations serving migrants and asylum seekers could benefit all parties involved and make possible a more coordinated and coherent response.

Mexico and the United States might also look at alternate ways of conducting in-country or off-shore processing for Central American asylum seekers. These could include safe zones within Central America where asylum applications could be filed, as was tried in a limited way with the Central American Minors (CAM) program (which included an alternate safe zone in Costa Rica, for those who needed to leave their origin country completely).⁴⁴ Alternately or additionally, the U.S. and Mexican governments—possibly together with other partner governments—could establish a joint asylum processing center in southern Mexico to receive asylum applications in a safe zone.

All of these options are far more likely to strengthen the response to humanitarian movements through the region than current attempts to outsource asylum processes to third countries that do not have the capacity to handle a high volume of claims or to force asylum seekers to wait in precarious conditions along Mexico's northern border. Indeed, U.S. policymakers appear to be pursuing some of the least effective, sustainable, and fair options available, rather than those with a high probability of success. Mexican policymakers have agreed to some of these measures, though perhaps less than enthusiastically, without providing a clear alternative path.

2. Creating Pathways for Labor Migration

While a substantial number of irregular migrants from Central America are seeking protection, others are looking to improve their lives by pursuing employment opportunities they cannot find in their home countries; many move for a combination of these and other reasons, such as family reunification. Though recently declining, high birth rates in Guatemala and persistent drought in Guatemala and Honduras have

42 Capps et al., *From Control to Crisis*, 35–36.

43 This program was operated by GeoCare, a unit of an ICE detention contractor, and subcontractors. GeoCare, *Family Case Management Program: September 21, 2015-June 20, 2017* (unpublished summary report, undated). For a discussion of the program, see also Capps et al., *From Control to Crisis*, 36.

44 Faye Hipsman and Doris Meissner, *In-Country Refugee Processing in Central America: A Piece of the Puzzle* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2015), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/country-processing-central-america-piece-puzzle.



accentuated a pattern of irregular labor migration that started in earnest in 2012 and has since risen significantly.⁴⁵ Gang activity and disputes, as well as crime syndicates, also appear to be on the rise and prey on local populations in the region, at times in collusion with public authorities.⁴⁶

It will never be possible (or politically feasible) for the United States and Mexico to offer employment to all Central Americans who want it. Yet, targeted employment-based visa programs could well help fill labor shortages in both countries, while also discouraging irregular migration by providing alternatives to some of those who might otherwise seek to cross borders illegally.

The new president of Mexico has expressed the desire to create a work-based temporary visa for Central Americans.⁴⁷ This can be done in part by extending the existing Border Worker Visitor Card, which currently applies to citizens of Guatemala and Belize, to Salvadorans and Hondurans. Policymakers could also expand the number of states in southern Mexico where card holders can work in order to reinforce the existing regional labor market between southern Mexico and neighboring Central American countries.

Targeted employment-based visa programs could well help fill labor shortages in both countries, while also discouraging irregular migration by providing alternatives.

However, Mexico's major labor shortages lie further away in the center and north of the country, particularly in the areas dominated by industrial production and export-oriented agriculture. Mexico has neither an effective employment-based visa for lower-skilled workers nor a mechanism for matching potential employees from Central America with employers in the Mexican formal economy. An effort to remedy this situation should be targeted not only toward Central American job-seekers but also job-seekers from southern Mexico as such a strategy could be a win-win for both Mexicans from some of the country's poorest states and Central Americans who wish to migrate to Mexico (and who, having secured a legal job in Mexico, might forego trying to enter the United States).

Designing a program of this nature requires significant expertise and planning. This could prove an area ripe for cooperation between the U.S. and Mexican governments, as well as businesses, civic groups, and international organizations. The Mexican-Canadian Agreement on temporary guest workers might provide a template for the development of programs with Central American countries, which would then requires bringing their governments into the design process.⁴⁸

The United States currently has limited options for labor migration for Central Americans, particularly the lower skilled. The H-2B program, which admits seasonal nonagricultural workers ranging from landscapers to crab pickers, is capped, and the uncapped H-2A program for agricultural workers has

45 Population Reference Bureau, "2018 World Population Data Sheet," accessed September 12, 2019, www.prb.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/2018_WPDS.pdf; Oxfam, "'Mojados' por la Sequía: Hambre y migración en el Corredor Seco de Guatemala," updated April 23, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/guatemala/mojados-por-la-sequ-hambre-y-migraci-n-en-el-corredor-seco-de-guatemala>.

46 Ben Raderstorf, Carole J. Wilson, Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, and Michael J. Camilleri, *Beneath the Violence: How Insecurity Shapes Daily Life and Emigration in Central America* (Washington, DC: The Inter-American Dialogue, 2017), www.thedialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Crime-Avoidance-Report-FINAL-ONLINE.pdf.

47 Alberto Morales and Misael Zavala, "México Detendrá Flujo de Migrantes con Visas de Trabajo dice López Obrador," *El Universal*, March 28, 2019, www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/mexico-detendra-flujo-de-migrantes-con-visas-de-trabajo-dice-lopez-obrador.

48 Ian Van Haren and Claudia Masferrer, "Mexican Migration to Canada: Temporary Worker Programs, Visa Imposition, and NAFTA Shape Flows," *Migration Information Source*, March 20, 2019, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/mexican-migration-canada.



historically favored Mexicans over Central Americans.⁴⁹ Since these programs are employer driven, there is no straightforward way to shift this preference and encourage employers to develop recruitment networks in Central America. However, one option worthy of further discussion is opening recruitment centers in the Central American countries to connect employers and prospective workers, as has been discussed between the U.S. and Guatemalan governments.⁵⁰

If the U.S. Congress decides to debate a reform of the legal immigration system, this would be an opportunity to create more targeted employment-based programs that could offer new migration options for Central Americans. Over time, U.S. immigration policy should open avenues for hiring workers from across the skill spectrum to fill jobs in industries and occupations where labor markets are very tight⁵¹—a move that would benefit both U.S. employers struggling to find workers and, very likely, low- and middle-skilled Central Americans seeking to come to the United States. In any U.S. immigration reform, it will be critical to think specifically about regional migration as a distinct arena that deserves special attention.⁵²

C. Options for Investing in Modern Enforcement and Border Management

All countries should control their borders and know who enters their territory, but simultaneously encourage and facilitate legal transit and commerce. However, current U.S.-Mexico border policies do not reflect the changed reality of migration between the two countries. Many are rooted in policy decisions made two or more decades ago, when irregular migration from Mexico was still in full swing and legal flows of people and goods were much lower. Today, the two economies and societies are deeply intertwined and the number of legal crossings each day have multiplied, while illegal entries by Mexican migrants have dropped to much lower levels. The challenge today is dealing with irregular flows of migrants from third countries, principally (but not exclusively) in Central America, while ensuring robust and fluid legal commerce and exchange.

I. Immigration Enforcement

Perhaps the most important change that the U.S. and Mexican governments could make to manage irregular flows is to fix their asylum systems, as discussed above. But there are also sound investments in modern enforcement strategies that could help the countries both deal with the current surge in Central American migration and plan for the long term.

In the case of Mexico, it will be critical to make significant investments in modernizing the National Migration Institute (Instituto Nacional de Migración, or INM). This would need to include updating procedures and policies, creating a career path for INM agents and staff with significant salary increases, and developing internal control mechanisms that ensure compliance with legal norms. INM will need to define more clearly both its service and law enforcement components and its relationships with the National Guard and Customs Service (Servicio de Administración Tributaria, or SAT).⁵³ Mexican officials

49 In FY 2018, for example, more than 180,000 H-2A visas were issued to Mexican nationals, compared to about 4,000 to Guatemalans, 300 to Hondurans, and nearly 150 to Salvadorans. See U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, “Nonimmigrant Visa Issuances by Visa Class and by Nationality, FY1997-2018.”

50 DHS, “Joint Statement between the U.S. Government and the Government of Guatemala,” updated July 24, 2019, www.dhs.gov/news/2019/07/22/joint-statement-between-us-government-and-government-guatemala.

51 Pia M. Orrenius, Madeline Zavodny, and Stephanie Gullo, *How Does Immigration Fit into the Future of the U.S. Labor Market?* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2019), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/immigration-fit-future-us-labor-market.

52 Demetrios G. Papademetriou, Doris Meissner, and Eleanor Sohnen, *Thinking Regionally to Compete Globally: Leveraging Migration in the U.S., Mexico, and Central America* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2013), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/thinking-regionally-competes-globally-leveraging-migration-human-capital-us-mexico-and.

53 For previous recommendations on institutional change at Mexico’s National Migration Institute (INM), see Instituto para la Seguridad y la Democracia (INSYDE), *Diagnostico del Instituto Nacional de Migración* (Mexico City: INSYDE, 2013), http://insyde.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Resumen_Ejecutivo_Diagn%C3%B3stico_INM-Insyde-Espa%C3%B1ol.pdf; Consejo Ciudadano del Instituto Nacional de Migración (CCINM), *Personas en Detención Migratoria en México* (Mexico City: CCINM, 2017), https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CESCR/Shared%20Documents/MEX/INT_CESCR_CSS_MEX_28755_S.pdf.



may even want to consider whether INM should be replaced by a different institution that covers a broader mandate around border management.

It would be particularly important for INM (or a successor agency) to digitize its application procedures and records to better serve applicants and limit opportunities for corruption. The Mexican government will also need to invest in detention centers that meet international standards, especially with regards to minors and other vulnerable populations.⁵⁴ The United States could help the Mexican government address the structural needs of its migration agency through information sharing, technology transfer, and funding, either directly or in partnership with the International Organization for Migration. This would be a wise investment for both countries.

All of this should be eminently doable since INM raises significant revenue for the Mexican government through the fees charged to tourists and business travelers. A small increase in fees could easily cover additional expenditures to modernize the agency without taking funds from other areas of government.⁵⁵

The U.S. government also needs to rethink its approach to migrant detention. As noted above in the discussion of strategies for fixing the U.S. asylum system, there are alternatives to detention that would be both humane and fundamentally more well suited to the rapidly changing profile of arriving migrants. This revised approach could also include collocating different U.S. agencies and nongovernmental service providers within detention facilities to ensure coordination and attention to migrants' needs, and creating career paths for CBP staff who are not agents but case workers.

Both countries should commit to treating child migrants with utmost care in accordance with the highest standards of international law and to avoiding the separation of families, except in the most extenuating of circumstances.

2. Shared Border Management

The two governments should also continue their efforts to modernize their shared border. Efforts to place pre-inspection officers inside each country, to expand trusted traveler and shipper programs, and to expand unified cargo processing help facilitate legitimate transit while making it easier to detect illicit flows. These efforts, led by SAT and CBP, focus on ensuring greater security and scrutiny within existing flows rather than solely trying to stop illicit traffic at the border. They also take advantage of information and intelligence sharing as central elements in identifying potential threats. While mostly focused on commerce, rather than the flow of people, there are enormous opportunities to take a similar approach to the transit of individuals (as has happened with trusted traveler programs already).

Together, the U.S. and Mexican governments are advancing towards building a 21st-century border that enhances both security and transit, but there is a risk of backsliding as the focus on illegal crossings dominates all other issues. Significant investments in non-intrusive inspection technology are necessary to help agents on both sides of the border better identify illegal shipments hidden within ongoing border flows, including illegal narcotics, firearms, and bulk cash.⁵⁶

Between ports of entry, it will be vital to build a relationship between Mexico's newly formed National Guard and the U.S. Border Patrol. This would facilitate the sharing of information and intelligence in real time and could build on the relationship that was previously developed between the Federal Police and the Border Patrol. Additional expenditures in technology between ports of entry could help facilitate

⁵⁴ Rebekah F. Ward, "Mexico Detains Migrant Children in Cramped Holding Centers Despite Court Ruling," Reuters, August 9, 2019, www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-mexico/mexico-detains-migrant-children-in-cramped-holding-center-despite-court-ruling-idUSKCN1UZ2C2.

⁵⁵ Rodolfo Córdova Alcaraz, *Una Mirada al Presupuesto del Instituto Nacional de Migración en México* (Mexico City: Fundar, 2013), www.fundar.org.mx/mexico/pdf/INM2011.pdf; Fundar, *Análisis del Paquete Económico 2019*.

⁵⁶ On the history of creating a more efficient and secure border, see Andrew Selee, *Vanishing Frontiers: The Forces Driving Mexico and the United States Together* (New York City: PublicAffairs, 2018), 66–72.



the detection of illicit transit, although these are unlikely to be successful in the overall goal of migration management without reforms to the U.S. asylum system.

Finally, the United States and Mexico should begin to look more strategically at how they identify and track the smuggling networks that move large numbers of people to and across the shared border. There is still relatively little systematic intelligence on these networks that would help identify their leadership, structure, and resources. With improved information, the governments could consider how best to target the structure and finances of these groups, starting with those that move third-country nationals from outside the hemisphere and those that engage in predatory behavior towards migrants.

D. Options for Immigrant Integration and Inclusion

The greatest proof of successful immigration policy is if immigrants and their children have equal opportunities to fully participate in the economy and the social fabric of their communities. Perhaps no area of cooperation is more important or has the greatest unexplored potential than sharing ideas and practices across the border on how to best integrate immigrants into society.

I. Investing in Education and Access to Services

The United States has long-standing efforts to integrate newcomers and their children into its school systems, workforce, and other areas of public life. But these programs and services are often underfunded and need to be improved to meet the challenges of the future as migration flows become more diverse in their national origins and the labor market becomes more technology focused. These efforts should include a focus on improving the quality of English Learner (EL) services in schools, as well as investments for adults in workforce programs that promote integration outcomes. And given the rising levels of education among Mexican and other recent immigrants to the United States, credential recognition policies could benefit both newcomers and the communities in which they settle.

The Mexican government has also contributed significant resources to support the integration of Mexican migrants into U.S. society through its consular programming and public-private partnerships focusing on health, education, labor rights, and financial literacy.⁵⁷ Collaboration between the two countries in this regard already exists and can be expanded in ways that recognize not just structural barriers to integration but also cultural and linguistic factors that can support integration across generations.

In Mexico, there has been little attention to date to the integration of the more than 600,000 children who were born in the United States and now reside in Mexico.⁵⁸ U.S. consulates in the country play a key role in providing important identity and other documents to U.S. citizens, but there are gaps when it comes to this young and growing population. More attention should also be paid to the integration of the hundreds of thousands of return migrants who are Mexican citizens but have lived much of their lives abroad—not to mention immigrants from Central America, Cuba, Haiti, and elsewhere. Sustained efforts to provide access to identification documents and to adapt education systems, health programs, public services, and job training to meet their needs is essential for their future success and the broader Mexican society. For example, ensuring that public universities accept students who have attended high school abroad remains a challenge in some states, as does credential recognition of professional degrees across different fields.⁵⁹

The Mexican government, the private sector, and nongovernmental organizations could also help recent arrivals (both the U.S. born and Mexicans who have lived in the United States for an extended

57 Alexandra Délano Alonso, *From Here and There: Diaspora Policies, Integration, and Social Rights beyond Borders* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2018). Consular services and programming vary by site but generally include workstations on educational access, basic health screenings and referrals, financial literacy, among others. For example, see Mexican Consulate in New York, “Programas,” accessed August 11, 2019, <https://consulmex.sre.gob.mx/nuevayork/index.php/espanol/programas>.

58 U.S. Embassy in Mexico, “Niños Migrantes son Prioridad para Consulado.”

59 Ruiz Soto, Dominguez-Villegas, Argueta, and Capps, *Sustainable Reintegration*.



time) by facilitating Spanish language training and orientation programs. Mexico already offers this kind of support with English language access for its nationals in the United States, and this could act as a template for future domestic efforts. Existing federal and state programs for Mexican returning migrants could also be expanded—for example, those that assist participants in navigating government institutions, opening a bank account, or starting a business.

To strengthen its integration services for Mexicans returning voluntarily and involuntarily, as well as U.S.-born immigrants, it is essential for Mexico to develop an institutional framework for collaboration across government institutions at the federal, state, and local level, and with other stakeholders such as the U.S. consular network. Integration efforts on both sides of the Mexico-U.S. border also stand to benefit from closer cooperation between the two countries as they have much to learn from each other. In the realm of education, teacher and administrator exchanges, textbook programs, and teaching guides could support the outcomes of immigrant students. There are huge opportunities to promote this kind of exchange through public-private partnerships as well as expanded support for civil-society organizations and educational and health institutions as they develop such programs.

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2. Social Cohesion

Beyond the focus on access to services and institutional capacity, both countries face the larger and less tangible challenge of strengthening social cohesion—how immigrant and native-born residents forge a common understanding of what it means to belong to the same community. While social cohesion, to some extent, has to develop organically within communities, principled leadership from policymakers can play an important role in defining an inclusive society. These common understandings about what binds people—newcomers and natives—together have become frayed in recent years in the United States, and they have yet to be built in Mexico, which is still coming to terms with its role as an immigrant-receiving society.

In Mexico, large-scale return migration from the United States adds an additional layer of complexity to these dynamics. There is considerable stigma in the country around return migration, which is often conflated with criminal behavior. There is an urgent need to change the language used to describe returnees in public discourse and to acknowledge their potential and real contributions to the labor market and society at large. Indeed, studies increasingly show that returning migrants may bring both tangible and intangible skills, such as entrepreneurship, that can contribute to their post-return success.⁶⁰

Finally, in both Mexico and the United States, it is crucial to invest not just in immigrants and returning migrants but in receiving communities as well. Investments in education, health care, and housing in the localities where migrants settle can help bring up the quality of life for all, rather than creating a zero-sum situation between recent arrivals and long-time residents.

⁶⁰ Jacqueline Hagan, Ruben Hernandez-Leon, and Jean-Luc Demonsant, *Skills of the Unskilled: Work and Mobility Among Mexican Migrants* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015).

3. Legal Status

Lacking legal status in any country creates barriers to positive educational and labor outcomes, particularly for unauthorized immigrant children and youth. In the United States, addressing the precarious position of the Dreamers—both current DACA recipients and others who came to the United States as children without legal status but are not eligible for DACA—would not only support their integration and socioeconomic wellbeing, but also enable them to contribute more fully to the communities in which they live.

Almost half of Mexican-born immigrants in the United States lack legal status,⁶¹ so any future immigration reform that addresses this issue by creating an earned legalization program would have a huge impact on Mexican immigrants. This, in turn, would strengthen the integration of this sizeable population and provide a boost to U.S. labor markets.

Mexico, as it transitions into an immigrant-receiving country, must also consider effective legal pathways for unauthorized immigrants already in the country to adjust their status, as well as additional mechanisms for future legal migration. While asylum has become the primary vehicle for migrants seeking to adjust their status in Mexico, the system is overwhelmed and ill equipped to process high volumes of petitions, resulting in long delays that limit asylum seekers' access to critical integration services. Previous government efforts to regularize immigrants' status offer a promising starting point, if combined with increased outreach and timely adjudication.⁶² Even if small shares of migrants consider staying permanently in Mexico, providing legal pathways for them can maximize their social integration and economic contributions in the country over the long term.

E. Options for Investing in Regional Development and Addressing the Root Cause of Migration

The Mexican, U.S., and Central American governments have long utilized strategic development assistance as a long-term strategy for addressing the root causes of irregular migration through the region. The governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras established the Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in 2014 to stimulate the productive sector, develop human capital, improve public safety, and strengthen government institutions.⁶³ In a separate but complementary effort, the United States seeks to promote economic prosperity, improve security, and strengthen governance in the region through its Strategy for Engagement in Central America.⁶⁴ In June 2019, the Mexican government launched its Comprehensive Development Plan (PID) with Central America, seeking to bolster international commitment to development in southern Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.⁶⁵

Despite these pledges, however, development efforts by the United States and Mexico lack coordination in planning and implementation, thereby limiting their sustainability and success. Through its development plan, Mexico seeks to invest USD 100 million in social programs to create jobs for unemployed youth and

61 MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the 2012–16 ACS pooled and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), drawing on a unique methodology for assigning legal status to noncitizens developed in consultation with James Bachmeier of Temple University and Jennifer Van Hook of The Pennsylvania State University, Population Research Institute.

62 INM, “Programa Temporal de Regularización Migratoria,” updated July 4, 2017, www.gob.mx/inm/acciones-y-programas/programa-temporal-de-regularizacion-migratoria-90502.

63 Governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, “Triángulo Norte: Construyendo Confianza, Creando Oportunidades,” accessed September 11, 2019, <http://idbdocs.iadb.org/wsdocs/getdocument.aspx?docnum=EZSHARE-917344851-14317>.

64 Peter J. Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: An Overview* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2019), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10371.pdf>.

65 SRE, “The Foreign Secretary Announces Launch of the Comprehensive Development Plan with Central America at United Nations,” updated June 19, 2019, www.gob.mx/sre/en/articulos/the-foreign-secretary-announces-the-launch-of-the-comprehensive-development-plan-with-central-america-at-united-nations-205538?idiom=en.



in rural communities in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.⁶⁶ These programs may reduce migration pressures but require sustainable international investment and evaluation. At the same time, the U.S. commitment to development in Central America remains unclear after President Trump announced in March 2019 that the United States would be cutting hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to the region, linking this to criticisms that countries there were failing to control the recent surge in irregular migration.⁶⁷

Restoring U.S. aid—and increasing Mexican assistance—is critical. It is unlikely that the U.S. and Mexican governments will agree on a full menu of options for supporting regional development, but finding two or three areas of mutual interest in which to invest, in cooperation with local actors and international institutions, could help maximize their impact. By targeting aid to agreed-upon types of programs, they could build on each other's efforts, scale up effective initiatives, and perhaps attract other government donors.

Comprehensive reintegration programs and services for returning migrants are one key area for investment. Such programming can help returnees re-establish themselves, build ties to the society, and reduce the chances of them choosing to emigrate again. Some of the gang prevention and youth employment programs begun under U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) sponsorship in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have reported success in lowering gang participation. Targeted assistance in rural and indigenous communities in Guatemala has also shown promise in alleviating extreme poverty and increasing resiliency among agricultural workers.⁶⁸

Finding two or three areas of mutual interest in which to invest, in cooperation with local actors and international institutions, could help maximize their impact.

These initiatives can provide important models and lessons learned as policymakers design future programs. To make this type of systematic learning possible, there is a need for rigorous analysis of program designs and outcomes. Future aid should therefore build in evaluation mechanisms to measure and track impact across common indicators, including but not solely on migration.

More data, information, and analyses on migrants' communities of origin are necessary to understand the localized drivers of migration and how to address them. As a starting point, it would be helpful to map existing databases and collection mechanisms to leverage efforts across governments, international organizations, research institutions, and civil society. For example, matching Mexican and U.S. apprehension data with research in municipalities of origin could help design much more effective development strategies in the future.

Efforts to strengthen governance and root out corruption are also critical, especially in Honduras and Guatemala. Strong support for international commissions that help local attorneys general pursue corruption investigations, such as the former International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala

66 Misael Zavala, "México Invertirá 100 Millones de Dólares en Centroamérica," *El Universal*, June 21, 2019, www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/politica/mexico-invertira-100-millones-de-dolares-en-centroamerica.

67 Lesley Wroughton and Patricia Zengerle, "As Promised, Trump Slashes Aid to Central America over Migrants," Reuters, June 17, 2019, www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-trump/as-promised-trump-slashes-aid-to-central-america-over-migrants-idUSKCN1TI2CZ; Meyer, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America*.

68 Megan Specia, "Trump Wants to Cut Aid to Central America. Here are Some of the Dozens of U.S.-Funded Programs," *New York Times*, April 2, 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/04/02/world/americas/trump-funding-central-america.html.



(CICIG)⁶⁹ and the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH),⁷⁰ are critical investments, as is funding for citizen efforts to monitor corruption. The launch of the International Commission against Impunity in El Salvador (CICIES) in September 2019, with the support of the Organization of American States, provides another promising mechanism to strengthen governance and reduce corruption in the region.⁷¹

Similarly, as the political crises in Venezuela and Nicaragua deepen and emigration increases, it will be vital for the U.S. and Mexican governments to coordinate strategy around these movements. While the United States and Mexico have adopted different approaches to these two hemispheric crises, that should not prevent active cooperation to ensure that the democratic will of the people can be heard in both countries and the crises overcome.

IV. Towards a More Cooperative Approach on Migration

It is hard to see in the current environment—when tensions abound and U.S. and Mexican interests seem to be diverging so sharply—how the governments of these countries could work closely together to address migration issues with shared purpose. Yet it is important to note that the United States and Mexico are already and have long been partners on many of these issues. Over time, the two countries have also become much closer in their structural relationship to migration. They are, to be sure, not in the same situation, but they are far more similar than they have ever been before. As a result, migration, integration, and development policies should reflect this greater convergence of interests.

Much of the conflict plaguing the Mexico-U.S. relationship will not vanish overnight, but both countries have a clear interest in recognizing their similarities, finding practical ways to learn from each other, and creating spaces for greater collaboration. Cooperative approaches to migration that emphasize not only effective enforcement and border management but also legal migration pathways, timely humanitarian protection, proactive support for integration, and an investment in regional development to address the drivers of forced migration would go a long way toward helping both countries alleviate some of the tension and take advantage of the benefits immigration offers.

69 United Nations, “CICIG (International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala),” accessed September 8, 2019, www.un.org/undpa/es/node/183334. After a series of unsuccessful negotiations between the Guatemalan government and the United Nations to extend its mandate, CICIG discontinued its operations in September 2019; see Sonia Pérez D., “As UN Body Wraps Up in Guatemala, Fears for Anti-Graft Fight,” Associated Press, September 2, 2019, www.apnews.com/b1778efc68fb4b07b746fadb835a9606.

70 Organization of American States (OAS), “Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras,” accessed September 8, 2019, www.oas.org/en/spa/dsdsm/maccih/new/default.asp.

71 Nelson Renteria, “El Salvador Launches Anti-Corruption Commission, Inspired by Guatemala,” Reuters, September 6, 2019, www.reuters.com/article/us-el-salvador-corruption/el-salvador-launches-anti-corruption-commission-inspired-by-guatemala-idUSKCN1VR2QP.



Appendix. Study Group on Mexico-U.S. Migration Members

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Note: The discussions of the study group shaped the findings of this report, but the authors are solely responsible for the report's contents. Study group members were not asked to endorse the report.



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About the Authors



Andrew Selee has been President of the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) since August 2017. Prior to that, he spent 17 years at the Woodrow Wilson Center, where he founded the Center's Mexico Institute and later served as Vice President for Programs and Executive Vice President. He has also worked as staff in the U.S. Congress and on development and migration programs in Tijuana, Mexico.

Dr. Selee's research focuses on migration globally, with a special emphasis on immigration policies in Latin America and in the United States. He is the author of several books, including, most recently, *Vanishing Frontiers: The Forces Driving Mexico and the United States Together* (PublicAffairs, 2018). He has published opinion articles in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Foreign Affairs*, and *Foreign Policy*, and he writes a regular column in Mexico's largest newspaper, *El Universal*.

Dr. Selee was a Co-Director of the Regional Migration Study Group, convened by MPI with the Wilson Center to look at regional migration flows among the Central American countries, Mexico, and the United States.

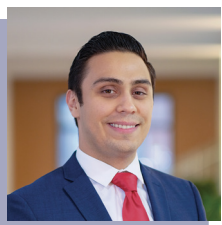
He holds a PhD in policy studies from the University of Maryland, an MA in Latin American studies from the University of California, San Diego, and a BA, Phi Beta Kappa, from Washington University in St. Louis.



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Her research focuses on issues of international migration from Mexico to the United States and its impact on education and the structure of Mexican families on both sides of the border. Currently, she is a co-researcher at the Mexican Migration Project, organized by the University of Princeton, University of Guadalajara, and Brown University. She has also been a participant in the Binational Dialogue on Mexican Migrants in the United States and Mexico, organized by Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS) and Georgetown University.

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The Migration Policy Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank dedicated to the study of the movement of people worldwide. MPI provides analysis, development, and evaluation of migration and refugee policies at the local, national, and international levels. It aims to meet the rising demand for pragmatic and thoughtful responses to the challenges and opportunities that large-scale migration, whether voluntary or forced, presents to communities and institutions in an increasingly integrated world.

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