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# Mapping Dynamics of Humanitarian Assistance in a Changing Environment

April 2021

# Acknowledgements

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The Columbia SIPA Capstone team would like to extend our gratitude to the interviewees and advisors who made our research possible.

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## Acronyms

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<b>ACLED</b>	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
<b>CBP</b>	Customs and Border Protection
<b>COMAR</b>	Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance
<b>DACA</b>	Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals
<b>DHS</b>	Department of Homeland Security
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>INM</b>	National Institute of Migration (Instituto Nacional de Migración)
<b>LGBTIQ</b>	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer
<b>MPP</b>	Migrant Protection Protocols
<b>MSF</b>	Médecins Sans Frontières / Médicos Sin Fronteras
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organization
<b>SIPA</b>	School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University
<b>TVRH</b>	Humanitarian visas (tarjetas de visitante por razones humanitarias)
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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## Executive Summary

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Over the past decade, rising rates of violence and economic uncertainty in countries in the north of Central America have resulted in mass migration and displacement of people from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. The rise of displaced people traveling to Mexico and the United States, in combination with limited protection and legal support for migrants and increasingly restrictive migration policies, has resulted in a humanitarian crisis in the region. This complex and evolving reality has been further complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic and climate disasters in Central America.

Within Mexico, there have been significant efforts by civil society organizations to provide shelter, medical attention, legal support, and other direct services to migrants in need. However, due to the rapidly changing context of the humanitarian crisis, the overall scope, scale, and impact of these services is not well understood.

This report was developed by a team of graduate students at Columbia University who partnered with Médecins Sans Frontières to investigate the evolving service, situational, and legal landscape surrounding migration from northern Central America to Mexico and the United States. Importantly, this report contextualizes existing evidence with the perspectives of 90 direct service providers, advocates, and topical experts (35 interviewed and 55 surveyed) to create a clearer understanding of current migration trends in Mexico.

### Key Research Findings

**Albergues:** Albergues provide temporary shelter for migrants and can be found along key migration routes in Mexico. Although most shelters are open to all migrants, perceptions of safety, regulations that separate families, and other factors may influence some migrants to look elsewhere for accommodations. Discriminatory practices in some albergues limit vulnerable populations' access to protection and services. In addition, criminal groups and authorities frequently remain in the areas surrounding albergues, and albergues often have to collaborate with authorities to accomplish their objective of caring for migrants.

**Service Delivery:** There are many direct service providers who interact with migrants throughout their travels and collectively provide vital services, such as food and medical provision, rights education, and legal services. Service providers face a multitude of barriers to attaining the resources and connections they need to serve migrants. During interviews, there were 24 mentions of how direct service providers are unable to adequately meet the needs of migrants. Direct service providers expressed the desire for more collaboration between organizations to bridge the gap between provision and need, but also widely recognized the difficulty in managing and maintaining such a network.

**Violence:** Service providers throughout Mexico perceived the three northern routes to be the most dangerous for migrants (70% indicated the Northeast route and 40% selected the Northwest and Northern routes) due to the high presence of organized crime. Interviewees noted that along the U.S. border, Tamaulipas was particularly dangerous, in addition to Piedras Negras, Ciudad Juárez, and Tijuana. In central and southern Mexico, the route between Mexico City through Hidalgo as well as the states of Veracruz, Chiapas, and Tabasco were highlighted by interviewees as notably dangerous for migrants.

**Unseen & Vulnerable Populations:** Although all migrants are susceptible to discrimination and harassment, some populations are at greater risk for violence due to the intersection of their identities.

**Women** face increased risk for gender-based violence, lack access to sexual and reproductive health-related services, and often feel unsafe reporting instances of violence due to high rates of police corruption. **LBGTIQ migrants** are frequently overlooked in humanitarian response and at risk for violence at the hands of both cartels and state actors. **Unaccompanied children** are common targets for gang violence and recruitment by organized crime, and Mexican law prevents children from staying at shelters. **Black migrants** are disproportionately placed in detention and deported and are routinely denied access to services. **Indigenous migrants** often lack access to official documentation and translation services are rarely available for Indigenous languages, putting them at higher risk for detention, deportation, and family separation.

**Communication & Information Sharing:** Migrants rely on a multitude of sources for information throughout their migration journey. Up-to-date, accurate, and accessible information can be difficult to attain, so migrants rely heavily on communities in their country of origin, fellow migrants along their routes, and service providers, particularly shelters. Migrants use this information to choose routes based on the points of greatest vigilance of the authorities, activities of organized crime groups, means of transport, distance, and cost.

## **Key Recommendations on Humanitarian Needs**

### **1. Ensure culturally competent care for non-Spanish and non-English speakers**

Develop mechanisms to ensure that migrants who do not speak Spanish have equal access to information and services. Adapt services to accommodate cultural differences between migrants, ensuring routine translation of written materials into relevant languages, and consistently providing real-time audio translation.

### **2. Provide trauma informed delivery of aid for vulnerable populations**

Ensure the provision of mental health services, sexual and reproductive health services, and other services recognize and respond appropriately to the multiple and overlapping identities that shape migrants' vulnerability to violence, discrimination and other sources of trauma before and during their journeys.

### **3. Re-distribute resources to local advocates and service providers in the northern countries of Central America**

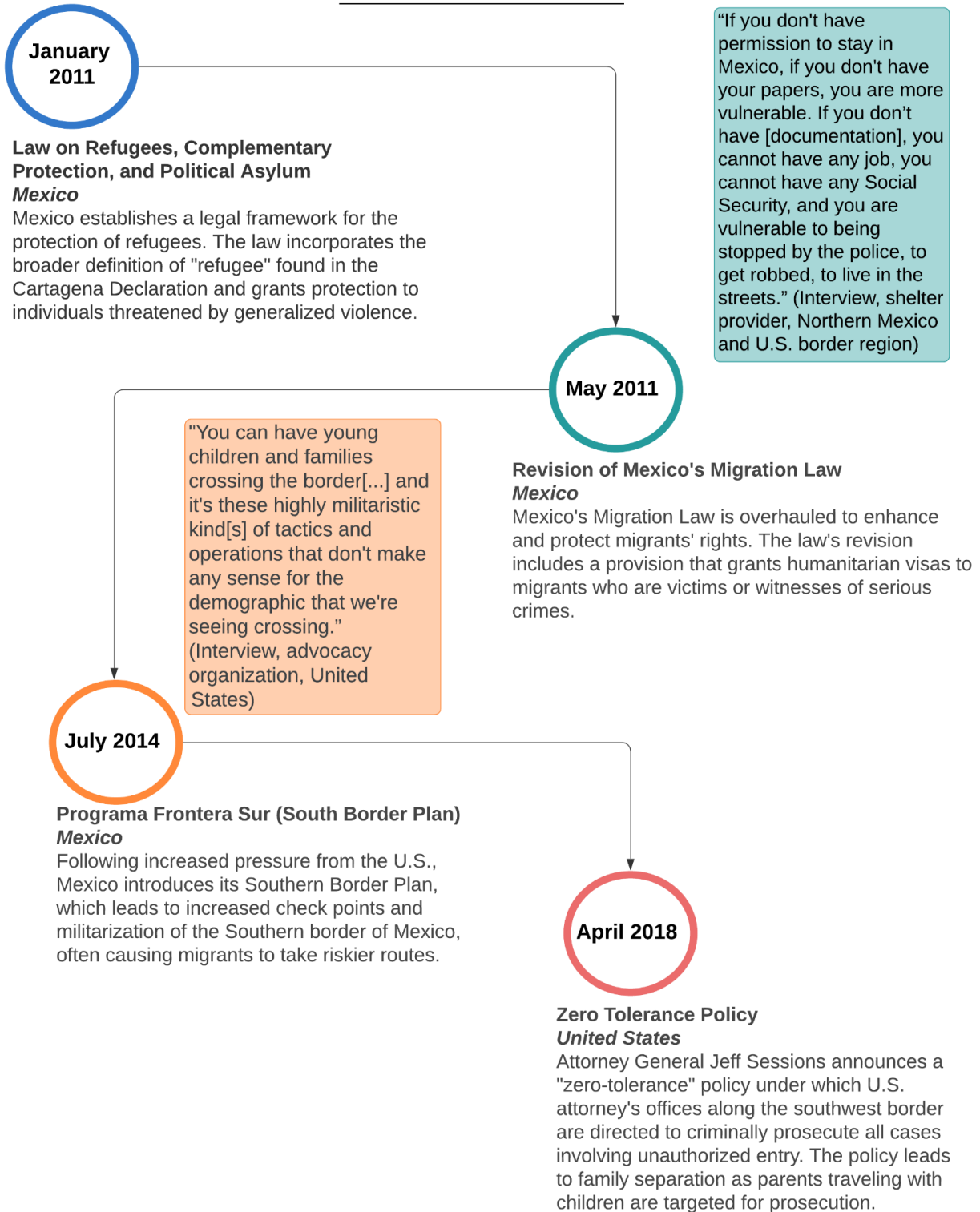
Strengthen the provision of resources to locally based organizations through sub-grantee or advocacy programs could help expand the network of advocates and humanitarians working to protect vulnerable populations in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, thereby improving service delivery, access to information, and networks for collaboration.

### **4. Promote continuity of care for people on the move**

Assess how MSF can best ensure that migrants maintain access to services (medical, social, legal) while on the move. Possible strategies include:

- Strengthening collaboration with case management service providers
- Supporting a more robust system of referrals between different locations and across sectors
- Ensuring referrals are tracked and making the referral system more accessible to smaller organizations
- Exploring how referrals to remote/virtual services might reduce gaps in service provision and supporting migrants in connecting to remote services, with a particular focus on older migrants, migrants who speak languages not widely used online, and others with limited access to remote services.

## Timeline of Key Policies (2011-2021)



**Comprehensive Development Plan of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico**  
**Mexico**

The governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico sign an agreement to promote development in the region.

**December 2018**

When asked to indicate the U.S. policies they believe are most harmful to migrants' wellbeing, service providers selected MPP more than any other policy. (SIPA survey results)

"[A law in Mexico] actually entitles everyone who is in Mexican territory to have access to basic medical services [...] However, we all know that none of this has ever been applied [...] as it should, specifically in the case of migrants." (Interview, direct service provider, multiple locations)

**December 2018**

**Migrant Protection Protocols**  
**United States**

Also known as the "Remain in Mexico" program, MPP requires asylum seekers and others entering the U.S. without documentation to wait in Mexico for the duration of their immigration proceedings.

**June 2019**

**U.S.-Mexico Migration Deal**  
**Mexico/United States**

Under the deal, Mexico agrees to ramp up immigration enforcement, including detaining and deporting more migrants. Mexico also agrees to provide jobs, healthcare, and education to returned migrants.

"Title 42 keeps sending people back [...] So you have 30,000 people coming [...] to Tijuana, actually crashing with the flow coming up. So the northern border cities are going to be, again, in a very precarious situation." (Interview, direct service provider, multiple locations)

**March 2020**

**Title 42**  
**United States**

At the onset of the pandemic, a health statute from 1944 is used to justify the closing of the U.S. southern border to "nonessential" travel. Under the policy, hundreds of thousands of migrants are expelled from the U.S. without due process.

# Introduction

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Over the past decade, rising rates of violence and economic uncertainty in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador have resulted in mass migration and displacement. The increasing number of displaced people traveling to Mexico and the United States, in combination with limited protection and legal support for migrants and increasingly restrictive migration policies, has resulted in a humanitarian crisis in the region. This complex and evolving reality has been further complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic and climate disasters in Central America.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) operates throughout Mexico providing medical consultations and mental health services to migrants, asylum seekers, and people deported from the United States. However, due to the dynamic nature of the humanitarian crisis, it is challenging to assess and meet the needs of people on the move. While there have been significant efforts to provide shelter, medical attention, legal support, and other services to migrants in Central America, Mexico, and the United States, the overall scope, scale, and impact of these services is not well understood.

In January 2021, a team of graduate student consultants at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) offered support to help MSF better understand the evolving legal, situational, and service landscapes surrounding migration from Central America to Mexico and the United States. The following report presents insights from the team's primary data collection to further contextualize the comprehensive humanitarian response to migration in the region. The report concludes with a series of recommendations for MSF to consider as it seeks to address the humanitarian crisis in the region.

## Drivers of Migration

*For a more detailed analysis, see **Appendix A**.*

Previous research indicates that Central American migration is overwhelmingly forced displacement, not economic migration. The first large wave of undocumented migrant flows from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras began in the 1980s when violent civil wars in Central America forced communities to flee their homes and travel north. Over the following decades, the proliferation of gangs and drug cartels further increased violence and instability in the region. Today, countries in northern Central America have homicide rates that are among the highest in the world. The dominance and predatory nature of gangs has created an environment whereby "...the local populations in the territories they control [often face] exorbitant extortions and forced cooperation under threat of violence and death."<sup>1</sup> Violence is therefore the primary push factor of Central American migration.

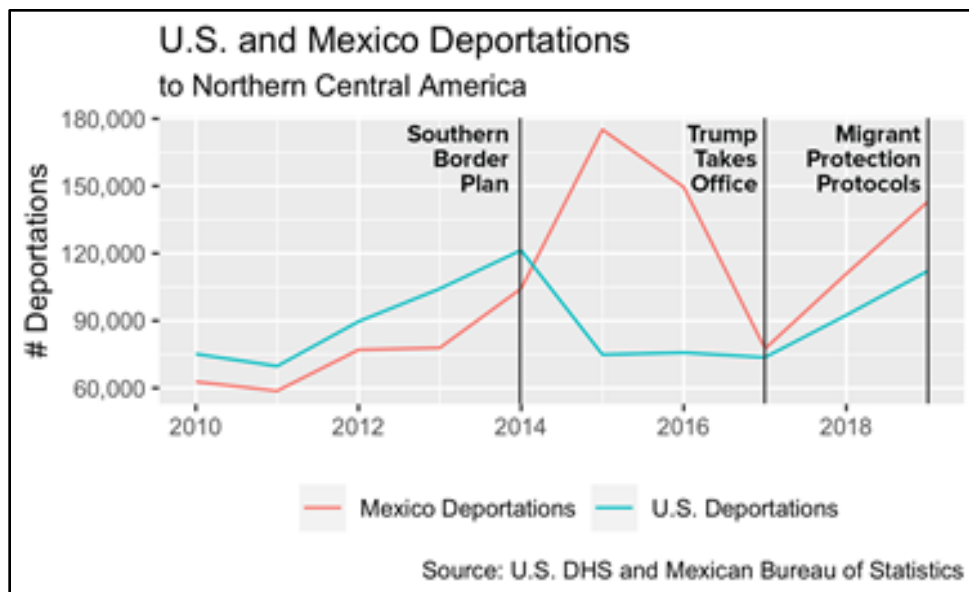
In general, the governments in northern Central America have been unable to address rising rates of violence or support their populations in times of emergency, including climate disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic. This combination of weak institutions and crisis magnifies social exclusion, poverty, and inequality, and it deprives "...large segments of the populations of the minimal conditions necessary to survive."<sup>2</sup> Many Central Americans therefore also migrate as a response to the state's instability and failure to meet people's basic needs for survival.

It is important to note that many people leaving Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador for Mexico and the U.S. are often on their second journey. Some have been deported after a previous migration attempt while others are displaced in Central America from a country of origin outside the region. Central America is also a region of transit for many migrants, so some are passing through these countries without intent to stay. In particular, Haitian and African migrants who have been previously displaced to Central or South America are now experiencing their second displacement to Mexico.

## Migration Trends & Policy Landscape

For a more detailed analysis, see **Appendix B**. In addition, **Appendix C** includes a separate analysis on Returnees and Deportees, **Appendix D** analyzes U.S. Policies & Biden Administration Priorities, and **Appendix E** discusses the specific effects that COVID-19 has had on migrants and service providers.

Over the last 10 years, the U.S. and Mexican governments have enacted increasingly restrictive policies attempting to reduce migration and limit asylum access. Despite militarization of the borders and expanded immigration enforcement, a growing number of migrants from northern countries of Central America have continued to travel towards the United States. Although Mexico passed promising migration reforms in 2011, the administration of Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) changed course with the 2014 Southern Border Plan leading to a spike in Mexican deportations to Central America. After U.S. President Donald Trump (2017-2021) took office, both U.S. deportations and apprehensions at the Southwest border began to rise, likely reflecting an increase in both enforcement policy as well as the spike in migrants arriving from Central America in 2019. During the COVID-19 pandemic, detention and apprehension figures for both Mexico and the U.S. declined significantly from previous years. However, these figures are already on the rise again in the early months of the Biden Administration.



## Methodology

This project used a mixed methods approach that combined a literature review, semi-structured interviews, service provider survey, and secondary analysis of existing datasets. Consent was obtained from all survey and interview participants. Quotes and other findings have been de-identified to protect the anonymity of research participants. A list of named project participants is available in **Appendix F**, and a detailed breakdown of the final sample of interview and survey respondents is included in **Appendix G**.

## Literature Review

Research began with an extensive review of existing literature to provide a foundation for further research, including primary data collection. Research was organized around three themes: law and policy, service providers, and drivers of migration. Analysis focused on the past 10 years and covered 57 sources.

## Semi-structured Interviews

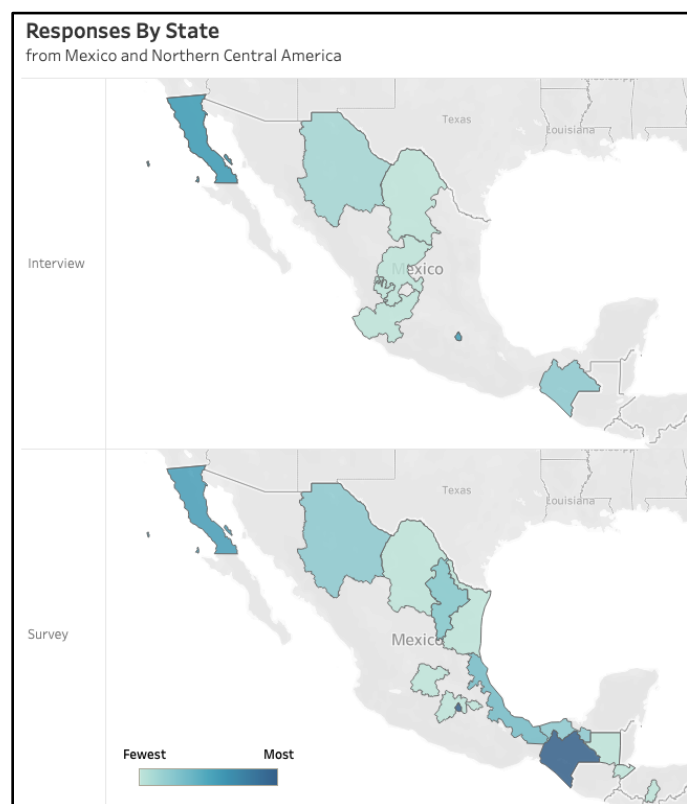
The SIPA team conducted 35 semi-structured interviews with direct service providers and topical experts, with targeted outreach to key contacts recommended by MSF. The team aimed to interview a range of providers, with a focus on hearing perspectives from organizations with different geographical coverage, types of services, target populations, partnerships, and sizes. Organizations working in Mexico and albergues were overrepresented in the sample. As shown in the map of respondents from Mexico, most respondents in Mexico worked in the northwest or in Mexico City. Topics covered were based on key themes and gaps identified during literature review, including migrants shifting needs, service provider capacity, and intersections with policy changes. Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes and were conducted over Zoom in English and Spanish. Participants were also given the option to complete the interview as a written, web-based form. The team audio recorded Zoom interviews, transcribed key quotes, and independently coded a subset of transcripts by hand to identify key themes. Team members then coded all transcripts in Dedoose version 8.0.45.<sup>3</sup>

## Survey

The SIPA team distributed an email-based survey to 454 service providers from MSF's contacts based in the United States, Mexico, and northern Central America. Organizations based in Mexico were overrepresented in the sample. The survey included 44 questions about migration routes, migrants' experiences of violence, key gaps in service provision, policy and legal issues, unseen populations and collaboration. In total, the survey received 55 complete responses, representing a response rate of 12%. As shown in the map, the highest numbers of survey respondents were from Chiapas and Mexico City, with few respondents from Central America. The survey sample was not randomized and cannot be taken as representative of the entire population. Analysis was conducted in R version 4.0.5 and visualization was conducted in Tableau version 2021.1.<sup>4,5</sup>

## Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of generating summary statistics and visualizations of trends based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include MSF's data on albergue capacity and service provision (n = 163), the SIPA service provider survey data (n = 55), and data collected during semi-structured



interviews (n = 35). Secondary data sources for information on deportations, apprehensions, and visas include administrative data aggregated from the Mexican Bureau of Statistics, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). Secondary data on migrant deaths, incidents of violence, and displacement trends was collected from a variety of open-source databases including the Missing Migrants Project from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Refugee Population Statistics Database from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).

## Limitations

The findings presented in this report have four key limitations. First, recruitment and data collection occurred between February and March 2021. The short timeline limited the number and representativeness of interviews and survey responses included in the project. Second, travel restrictions from the COVID-19 pandemic prevented in-person data collection. As a consequence, the team used email exclusively to reach out to contacts for interviews and surveys. Given this approach, service providers with limited internet access are likely underrepresented in the report's findings. Third, the team had limited capacity to complete interviews and assess existing literature in Spanish. The majority of sources cited in the literature review are English-based, and approximately one-third of all interviews were conducted in Spanish. The overreliance on English-based sources may bias the findings, since non-English speakers and authors (Spanish, Haitian, Indigenous people) likely have different and nuanced perspectives that are not captured in the report. Fourth, the SIPA team did not speak with migrants directly. Thus, findings related to the needs and experiences of migrants represent the perceptions of service providers, rather than those of migrants themselves.

## Albergues

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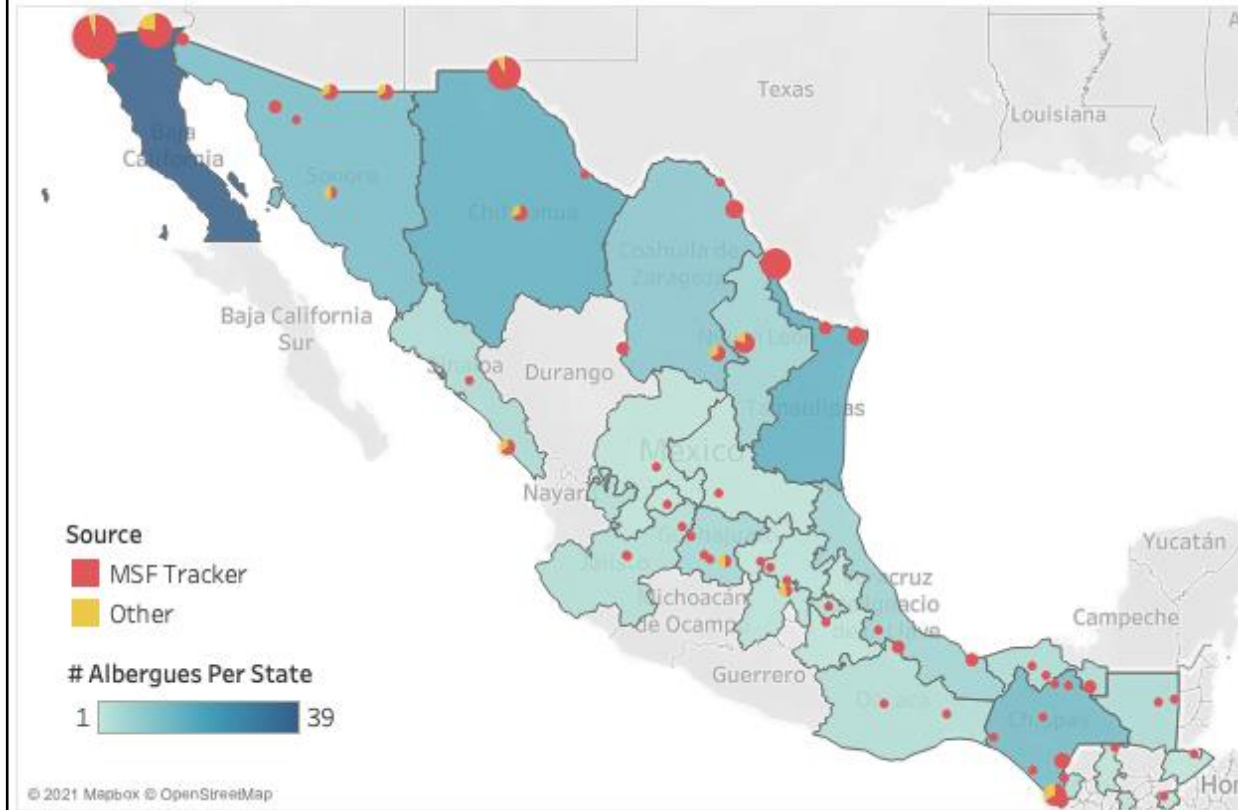
Albergues and migrant houses provide temporary shelter for migrants and asylum seekers. Mexico's 2011 Migration Law legalized shelters as sanctuary-like spaces where migrants could receive services and information, as well as pursue available forms of protection without risk of arrest and deportation.<sup>6</sup> They serve as both spaces of protection and service provision, including beds, food, showers, and clothes. In some instances, albergues also provide medicine, education, psychosocial support, and violence prevention services.<sup>6</sup> Considering migrant's vulnerability to violence from both authorities and criminal organizations, albergues play an essential role in migrant safety and protection.

## Locations

Albergues can be found along key migration routes in Mexico. Shelters are usually run by civil society, religious, or volunteer organizations, and new shelters often emerge to respond to migrants' changing needs for shelter or transportation through Mexico.<sup>7</sup> The map below illustrates that the greatest density of albergues are located along the U.S.-Mexico border, and in particular in Baja California. In Southern and Central Mexico, many of the shelters are located near the train tracks of "La Bestia", which many migrants rely on to help transport them more quickly north.<sup>7</sup>

## Albergues by State and City

Pie charts size indicates the number of albergues recorded by city (recorded by MSF or other sources). Shading reflects the number of albergues per state.



## Services

In addition to providing temporary shelter, albergues serve as an important information source for migrants to learn about risks they may encounter throughout the route.<sup>8</sup> While the range of information and support services at shelters can vary widely, many are able to provide advice on routes, safety, and additional resources available to migrants once they leave the albergue.

Some shelters are also able to provide free legal and human rights advice. If a migrant in Mexico “is the victim of or witness of a crime, including, robbery, kidnapping, extortion, rape or murder, they are eligible to apply for a humanitarian visa at the National Migration Institute (INM).”<sup>9</sup> At least one of the shelters interviewed helped migrants through the process of reporting the crime and going through the documentation process. In practice, however, many migrants are unlikely to report crimes due to fear of impunity or increased vulnerability for themselves, a trend that was mentioned by several interviewees. Additionally, in 2019 the Mexican government drastically reduced the number of humanitarian visas available.

## Access to Albergues

Although most shelters are open to all migrants, perceptions of safety, regulations that separate families, and other factors may influence some migrants to look elsewhere for accommodations. According to a

study from 2014, women often feel unsafe staying in shelters and may prefer to find accommodation in hotels or guesthouses.<sup>10</sup> However, interviewees for this report mentioned that women were more likely to stay in shelters than men because it offered additional safety. Service providers in the SIPA survey had similar perceptions, indicating that women actually are less likely to avoid accessing services compared to other groups.

According to several interviewees, some shelters separate families (men are separated from women and children), so families traveling together prefer to look for other options. Under a recent amendment to the Migration Law, shelters cannot receive children under 18 years old, leaving unaccompanied children particularly vulnerable.<sup>11</sup> Now, minors must legally be housed in government-run facilities, but the government lacks the capacity to house all the children in need. As a result, many minors end up living on the streets where they are easy targets for criminal organizations.

## **Rules and Restrictions**

Albergues often impose rules, such as restricted entry and exit, that guests must follow in order to receive services.<sup>9</sup> According to interviewees, migrants sometimes perceive that this practice limits their freedom so they prefer to look for other alternatives. If migrants are found violating the shelter's rules, the shelter can limit their access. Some albergues share information on migrants who stay at their shelters, so when an individual violates one shelter's rules, their access to other albergues can become more limited. Interviewees mentioned substance abuse as a possible factor for barring a migrant's entry, or if the migrant was perceived to be a "troublemaker". Others noted financial barriers, as some shelters charge a fee to stay. If migrants are unable to find a job to fund the stay, they may be forced to stay on the streets.

## **Engagement with Authorities**

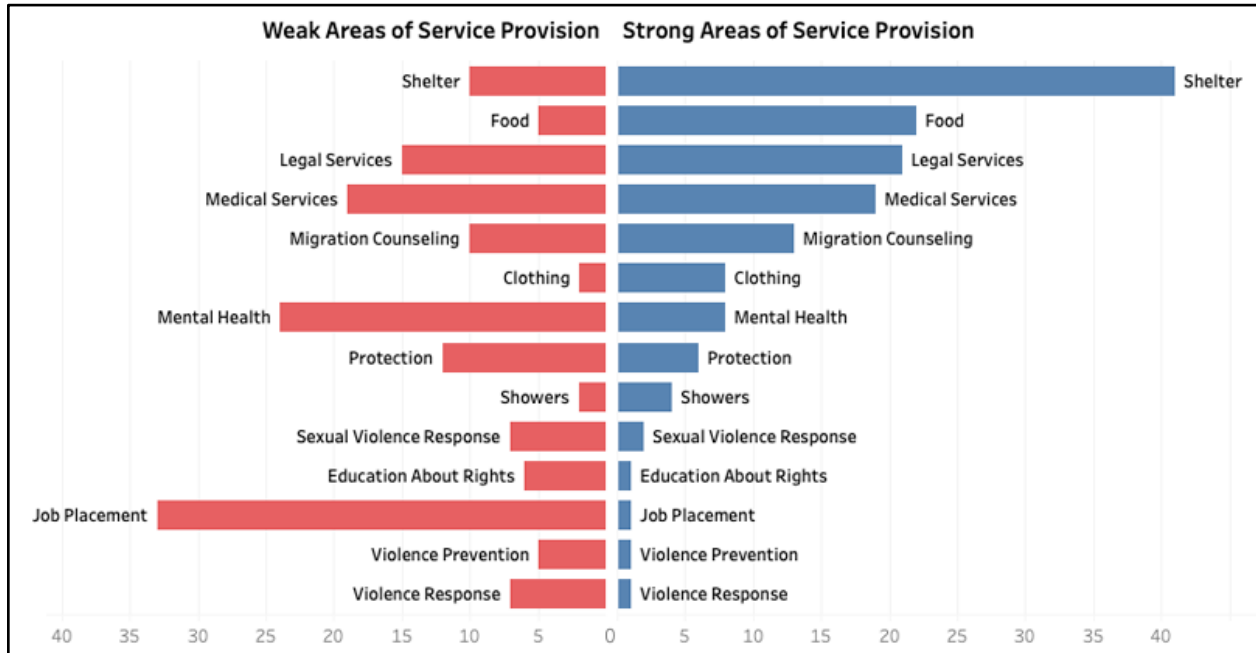
Criminal groups and authorities often remain in the areas surrounding albergues, and many albergues collaborate with authorities to accomplish their objective of caring for migrants.<sup>6</sup> Several interviewees mentioned this relationship is essential to maintain the albergues as a safe space. If they do not have this relationship with the municipal and state authorities to ensure that the surroundings are safe, they know that "smugglers, traffickers, drug dealers, everything is happening right here at the door." However, some interviewees explained that working with local authorities is a challenge that requires some political savviness. In areas with high rates of corruption, these relationships can be impossible.

## **Discrimination**

Interviewees noted that discriminatory practices in some albergues can limit access to protection and services for vulnerable populations. In particular, informants noted that LGBTIQ migrants may face harassment, violence, and discriminatory provision of services within albergues that serve more general populations, so they may attempt to conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity. Some interviewees also noted discriminatory treatment of Black and Indigenous migrants within albergues. For these groups, access to services may be more limited both because of prejudiced behavior by some service providers and because services themselves are not tailored to the needs of these populations.

## Challenges with Service Delivery

In addition to shelter, there are many other direct service providers who interact with migrants throughout their travels and collectively provide vital services, such as food and medical provision, rights education, and legal aid. Direct services providers often fill gaps in social services that governments are unable or unwilling to provide to migrants. Many rely on donation-based funding or provision of goods.



Service providers face a multitude of barriers to attaining the resources and connections they need to serve migrants. During interviews, there were 24 mentions of how direct service providers are unable to adequately meet the needs of migrants. Direct service providers expressed the desire for more collaboration between organizations to bridge the gap between provision and need, but also widely recognized the difficulty in managing and maintaining such a network.

### Policy-Driven Barriers

Many direct service providers indicated that barriers driven by policy were chief among the challenges they faced. These challenges often present either as policies blocking a provider's ability to serve a specific population or policies vastly increasing the number of migrants requiring services.

In Mexico, decreased support in healthcare provision for migrants has increased the burden - and urgency - of the work of direct service providers. One interviewee specifically cited the increased need for midwifery and neonatal care, citing instances of migrants being turned away from hospitals while in active labor. The interviewee also cited the state's lack of medicinal supplies, saying a hospital reached out to their organization when their stock of medications ran low.

U.S. policy has substantially increased the burden on direct service providers. Policies like the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) and Title 42, which force migrants to wait in Mexico and increase the duration of migrants' stays and their needs, translate to increased reliance on direct service providers. As more people are forced to wait at the border, direct service providers have larger populations to serve. Migrants waiting longer at the border also have more diversified needs than had they just been passing through. This

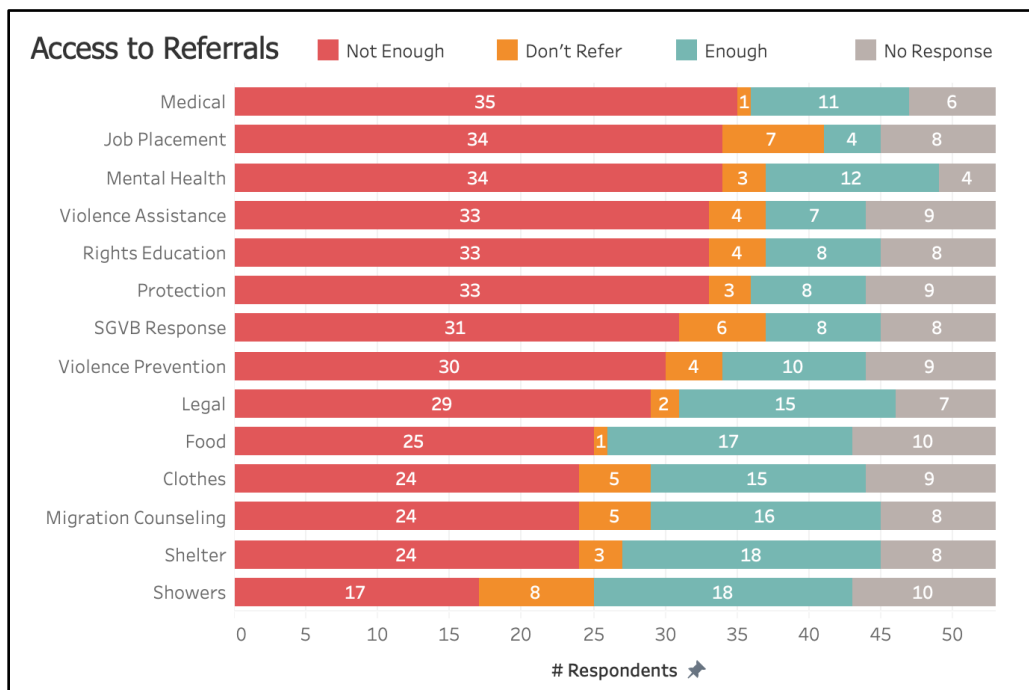
is particularly evident in the increased need identified by service providers for medical and legal services. Migrants with complex medical needs now have to procure medications in Mexico throughout their stay or expedite life-saving treatments they were hoping to get in the U.S. As most migrants have no legal status allowing them to safely stay in Mexico, they are more vulnerable to deportation. Migrants and service providers alike need support to navigate the immediate need of a legal status, which would allow migrants to remain in Mexico with the ultimate goal of claiming asylum in the U.S. as soon as possible.

### Lack of resources for local organizations in northern Central America

Vast gaps currently exist in service provision and legal aid throughout the countries in northern Central America. This is partly related to the funneling of resources to organizations with direct connections to the U.S. One interviewee noted that organizations in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras that have exclusively local staff and receive consistent U.S. funding typically have a founder who is from the U.S., established funding relationships, and at some point handed off leadership. As a result, there are vast gaps in coverage in areas without a history of U.S. presence, which are typically the most dangerous and where needs are most urgent. This poses a challenge in terms of service delivery, accessing information, and creating networks for more holistic support and collaboration.

### Referrals

Challenges with collaboration, in combination with lack of resources and political barriers, combined has compounded gaps in service provision. As migrants stay longer and have more complex and prolonged needs, service providers are rarely able to provide for all needs. Instead, they are specialized, providing one or several related services. To streamline provision and to best ensure every individual’s needs are met, service providers would ideally be able to provide a referral to a partner or nearby organization. However, many providers are unable to find consistent referrals, either due to the longevity of an organization or its lack of capacity. While many organizations have some capacity to provide for basic needs, many still need support in providing more specialized services, such as medical and mental health provision (See “Access to Referrals”).



## Violence

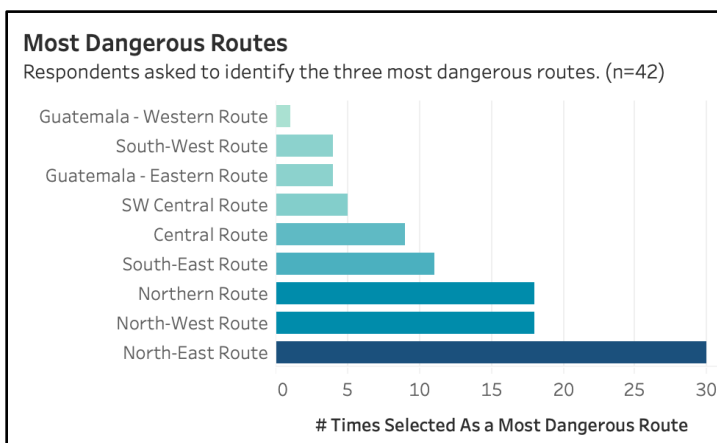
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**“The route through Mexico is the cemetery of Central America and it is increasing. We have had cases of violence by state agents and organized crime.”**

- Shelter Provider, U.S.-Mexico Border region

### Violence along migratory routes

After fleeing violence in northern Central America, migrants continue to face violence along the migration route at the hands of organized crime, state agents, local communities, other migrants, and even the institutions that have theoretically been put in place to protect them. As Martinez et. al. wrote in 2019, “Crossing from southern to northern Mexico is considered one of the most dangerous routes in the world for undocumented migrants.”<sup>12</sup>



Violence along the route is so pervasive that it has become normalized for many migrants. As one direct service provider explained:

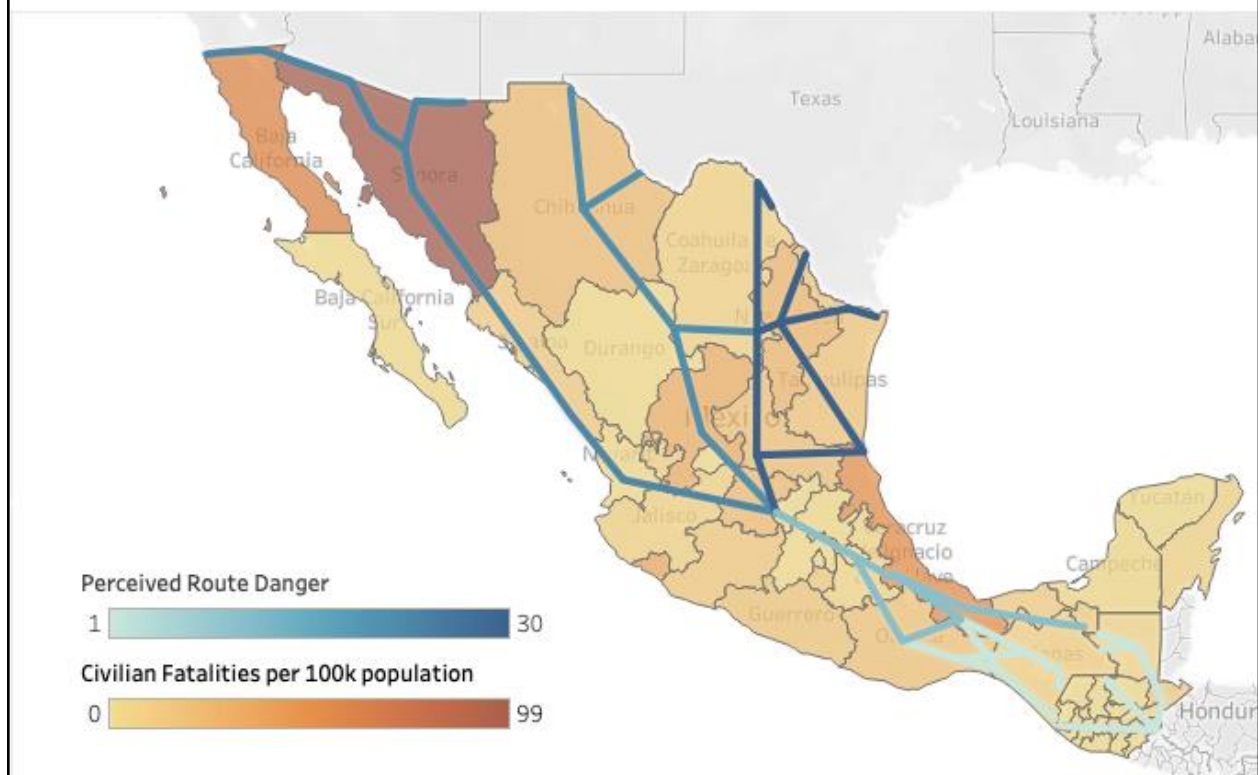
One thing that was shocking to me when I spoke to clients was how normalized violence is - particularly gender-based violence. Oftentimes, it won't even come out in initial interviews, because clients don't perceive it as noteworthy or worthy of disclosing because it's so pervasive. It's really been normalized for a lot of people. – *Direct Service Provider, United States*

### Violent Locations

SIPA survey findings indicate that service providers throughout Mexico perceived the three Northern routes to be the most dangerous for migrants – 70% indicated that the Northeast route along the Gulf of Mexico was among the most dangerous, followed by 40% selecting the Northwest and Northern routes as among the most dangerous (see figure “Most Dangerous Routes” and map “Most Dangerous Routes & States”). The presence of organized crime along much of the U.S. border creates much of this risk: as one service provider described, “The northern border four years ago, turned into a nightmare, because the crossings were controlled by organized crime”. Interviewees noted that along the U.S. border, Tamaulipas was particularly dangerous, in addition to Piedras Negras, Ciudad Juárez, and Tijuana. In Central and Southern Mexico, the route between Mexico City through Hidalgo as well as the states of Veracruz, Chiapas, and Tabasco were highlighted by interviewees as notably dangerous for migrants.

## Most Dangerous Routes and States

Based on ACLED figures for violence against civilians 2020-2021 (scaled by 100k of state population) and the number of survey responses identifying a route as among the most dangerous for migrants.



Guatemala is also perceived as particularly unsafe. According to a survey of migrants conducted by the Mixed Migration Center (n = 323), 22% of respondents indicated that Guatemala was the most dangerous country for transit and 14% mentioned Mexico.<sup>13</sup> While only a small share of respondents in the SIPA survey indicated that the Guatemalan routes were the most dangerous, these results were likely biased towards Mexican routes as the majority of SIPA survey respondents were based in Mexico. Certain areas along Guatemala's northern border, particularly between Flores and El Ceibo in Petén, as well as Parque Nacional Laguna Del Tigre, are viewed as extremely dangerous and almost outside of state control given the power and prevalence of criminal groups.<sup>14</sup>

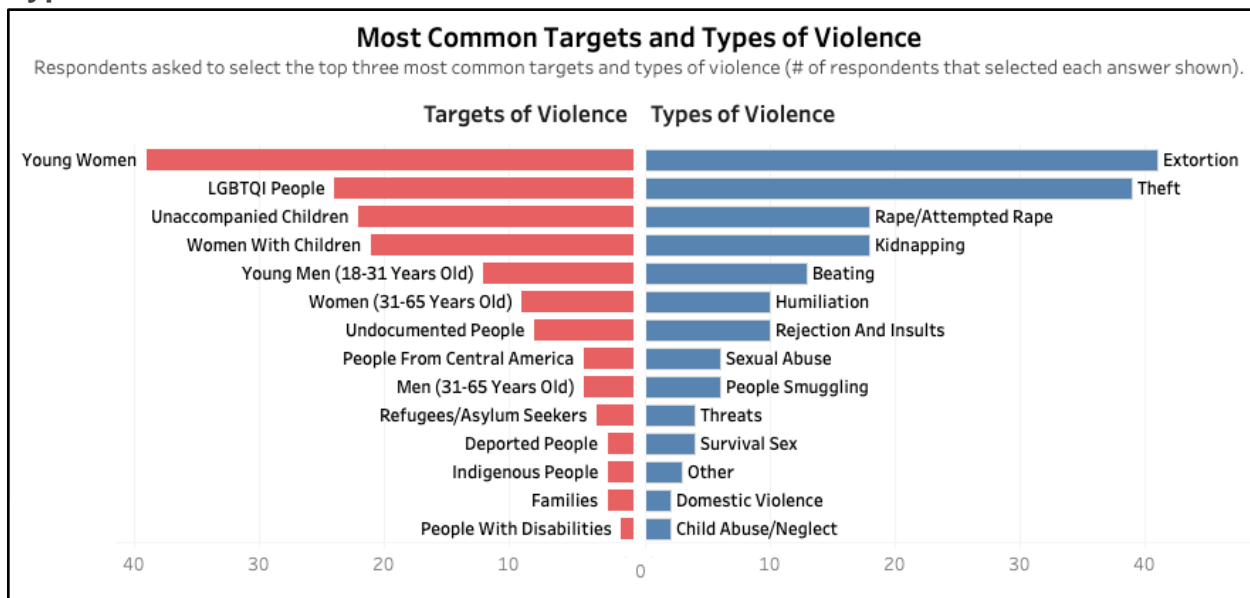
## Sources of Violence

Cartels are a key source of violence along the migration route. 65% of respondents to the Mixed Migration Centre Survey considered criminal gangs to be the main perpetrators of violent incidents.<sup>13</sup> It is not only migrants themselves that are targeted by organized crime – service providers also reported being targeted directly. Government agents are another notable source of violence against migrants, and reports of corruption and collaboration with organized crime are concerning. Approximately 25% of respondents in the Mixed Migration Centre Survey indicated that government officials are a primary perpetrator of violence.<sup>13</sup>

The massacre of 19 migrants in Tamaulipas in January 2021, for which a dozen Mexican police officers have been charged, is a gruesome example of the threat migrants face from law enforcement. As Michael Lettieri from the Center for United States-Mexican Studies told the *New York Times*, "Migrant's experience

violence not just because organized crime is involved in human smuggling but because the state is involved in organized crime.”<sup>15</sup> Interviewees confirmed this “double burden” of violence, saying that migrants “encounter violence from criminal organizations and from state authorities.” If migrants make it to the U.S., they may suffer mistreatment at the hands of U.S. authorities and in U.S. detention centers, and they risk deportation back to dangerous conditions across the border in Mexico.

## Types of Violence



Violence is directed at migrants in many forms: financial exploitation, physical brutalization, intimidation, humiliation, and institutional violence. The vast majority of respondents to the SIPA survey - about 75% - ranked financially motivated violence such as extortion and theft as the most common types of violence that migrants experience (see “Types of Violence”). Migrant bodies are exploited as a source of revenue, with several interview respondents highlighting that migrants have become “a commodity for organized crime.” Kidnapping, although perceived to be less common than extortion or theft, was nonetheless cited by 30% respondents as a common manifestation of violence. Cartels abduct migrants for both ransom and labor. As one shelter provider from the U.S.-Mexico border region explained, “the narco wants them as merchandise, they kidnap them to ask for money from the family,” as well as for “labor exploitation.”

It is important to note that SIPA survey results reflect the perceptions of service providers, rather than the experiences of migrants. Service providers may be unaware of all the types of violence that migrants face, as migrants are often fearful of reporting violence due to possible repercussions. According to one interviewee:

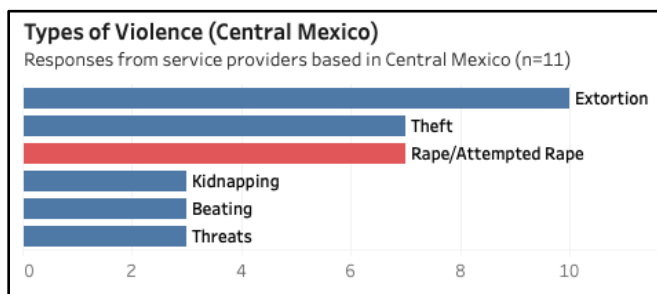
Women often don't report being the victims of crime. They're worried the very people who will be investigating the case might be somehow involved or somehow colluding with whoever hurt them. I think the main problem is people are too afraid to report crimes and when they do report crimes they're not adjudicated and they probably don't even reach the judicial level at all. – *Direct Service Provider, Central Mexico region*

Interviewees also highlighted that women migrants, in general, may be less likely to discuss incidents of sexual abuse due in part to their processes of assimilation, the sensitive and traumatic nature of their experiences, and concern about how their abuse will be perceived. One interviewee asserted that this does

not mean this violence is not happening and emphasized that the scale and frequency of sexual assault is much greater than official data reflects. This reporting gap is likely also reflected in the SIPA survey results.

### Gender-Based Violence

Women are targeted for violence based on their gender - over 70% of SIPA survey respondents indicated that young women (18-31 years old) are the most likely to experience violence (see “Targets of Violence”). As one interviewee noted, “women are especially vulnerable to the coyotes, human traffickers, and sexual abusers.” 30% of respondents to the SIPA survey ranked rape or attempted rape as among the most common types of violence that migrants experience. Given that gender-based violence is often underreported, it may be much more prevalent. SIPA survey respondents in Central Mexico, primarily based in Mexico City, indicated that rape/attempted rape is among the most common types of violence at higher rates than respondents in the rest of the country (see figure “Types of Violence, Central Mexico”). 63% of respondents in this region ranked rape or attempted rape as one of the three most common types of violence, far ahead of kidnapping. However, due to the small sample size it is unclear whether this represents a significant regional trend.

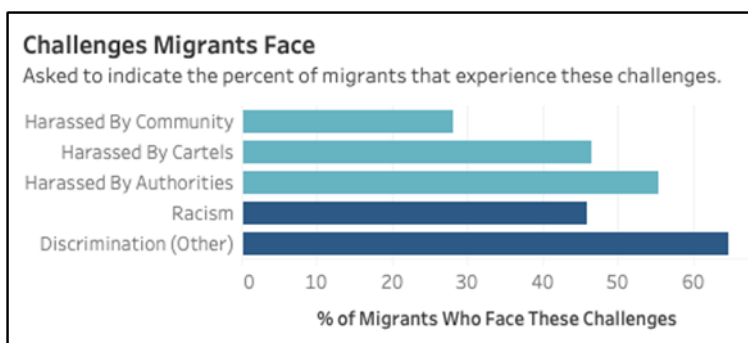


Additionally, many interviewees noted an increasing number of Mexican women fleeing their homes due to domestic violence perpetrated by their partners, who in some cases are also members of cartels or organized crime. In Mexico, 10 women are killed every day.<sup>16</sup> In 2019, there were 3,824 femicides in Mexico (5.9 women per 100,000), a shocking increase from 1,089 in 2007 (2 women per 100,000).<sup>16</sup> This has increased further during COVID-19 as people stay home and levels of stress and violence increase. One interviewee from an albergue mentioned that “more than half of the people [in the shelter] are from Mexico - women primarily and families mostly from Oaxaca and Michoacán - because of violence from their partners who have involvement in cartels. The issues bringing Mexican women to seek asylum are very similar, both groups do not feel safe.”

## Unseen & Vulnerable Populations

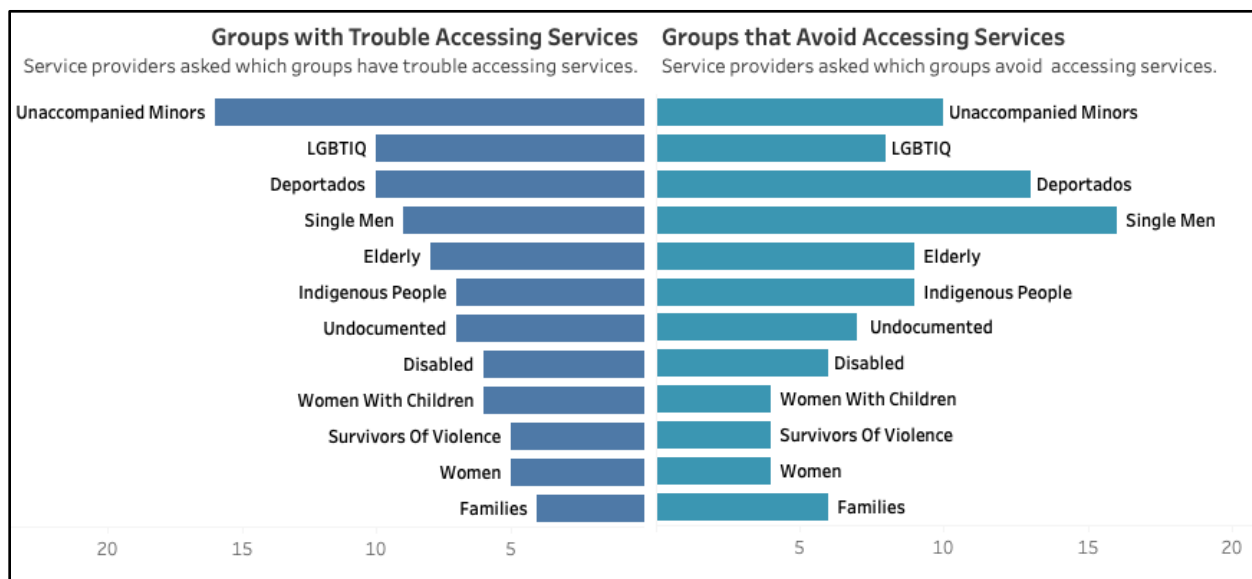
All migrants in Mexico are vulnerable, at least in part, due to their migratory status.<sup>17</sup> The stigmatization of migrants as “outsiders” increases their risk for violence from organized crime, government officials, and the communities they encounter on their journey.<sup>18</sup> Many undocumented migrants lack access to social networks, sources of income, or secure housing while traveling; this social exclusion increases their vulnerability.<sup>17</sup> Interviewees for this report also highlighted how lack of access to healthcare, legal services, and identity documents make migrating through Mexico increasingly difficult and dangerous.

Service providers responding to the SIPA survey indicated that over 60% of migrants experience some form of discrimination while traveling (see figure “Challenges Migrants Face”). Moreover, service providers perceived that 55% of



migrants experience harassment by authorities, 45% experience harassment from cartels, and 30% experience harassment by the communities through which they travel.

Although all migrants are susceptible to discrimination and harassment, some populations are at greater risk for violence due to the intersection of their identities. Characteristics like age, gender, race, sexual orientation, and gender identity all impact migrant safety, as well as their access to shelter, medical, and legal services (see figure “Groups with Trouble Accessing Services”). The following sections discuss some of the key populations identified by both interviewees and SIPA survey respondents as particularly vulnerable while migrating through Mexico.



## Women

The gender composition of migrant populations has changed drastically in the past decade. In the past, single men seeking economic opportunities represented the largest proportion of migrants moving from Central America and Mexico to the U.S.<sup>19</sup> However, the number of both cis and trans women migrants has increased in recent years, in part due to the high prevalence of gender-based discrimination and violence inflicted by partners, family, or gang members.<sup>20</sup>

Women who migrate or are deported face multiple “intersectional oppressions”.<sup>21</sup> SIPA Survey respondents identified young women (18-31 years old) as the most likely to experience violence on the migratory journey. Given the high rate of gender-based violence in Mexico, women migrants may be exposed to sexually transmitted diseases and experience unwanted pregnancies, forced abortions, and early motherhood. Further, many women lack access to sexual and reproductive health related rights and services, which may have otherwise helped them navigate these experiences and vulnerabilities.<sup>22</sup> One direct service provider in Central Mexico highlighted that both migrants and service providers perceive abortion to be difficult or impossible to access in Mexico, even in cases of rape, which further compounds and complicates the vulnerability of rape survivors.

In addition to gender-based violence, women often experience gender discrimination and stereotypes which limit their opportunities for economic development and employment.<sup>22</sup> With limited access to employment, women may perform illegal activities or enter into exploitative working conditions out of necessity. Throughout Mexico, women migrants are also at risk of kidnapping and human trafficking.

In an effort to avoid the violence and discrimination ubiquitous throughout this journey, women migrants may try to hide or minimize their presence, thereby covering or denying their cultural or basic identity features. Many women remain unseen through their entire migratory journey to the U.S.-Mexico border. Of note, this strategy is unique to women and LGBTIQ migrants and highlights how sexual orientation and gender identity can limit migratory options and confine decision-making. All of these experiences can compound and affect women not only physically, but also emotionally.<sup>22</sup>

**“They took their turns...they tied me by the hands. They stuffed my mouth so I would not scream... This is why I wake up not wanting to live. I feel I have sinned, and this sin lives inside me... Sometimes, I wake up and think it was just a nightmare, but then I feel the pain and remember it was not.” - Norma, Salvadoran migrant in US detention, interviewed 2015**<sup>39</sup>

The increase in female migrants has influenced additional changes in migration, specifically around the formation of caravans. Several interviewees indicated that the increasing prevalence in caravans is driven by the changing gender demographics of migrant populations, specifically because caravans are perceived as both safer and cheaper. Migration requires significant resources, one interviewee estimated that the cost of migrating with a coyote is between \$7,000 and \$11,000. Additionally, women often experience abuse at the hands of coyotes.<sup>23</sup> While this once meant that women, particularly poorer women, could not migrate or had to attempt to migrate without the “professional” help of a coyote, caravans have allowed these individuals to move in groups without paying the high costs. Further, as the number of women migrating with their families or children has increased, these caravans are able to provide an enhanced sense of communal safety. Notably, however, this strategy does not eliminate the risk of violence and may increase potential exposure to detention or deportation due to a higher presence of authorities and migratory controls.

## LGBTIQ populations

The percentage of LGBTIQ individuals among the migrant population in Mexico has increased in recent years, with LGBTIQ cases as a share of total cases officially recorded by UNHCR increasing from 1.6% to 10% between 2014 and 2016.<sup>1</sup> However, the scale of LGBTIQ migration is likely under-reported as several interviewees highlighted that trans women migrants may attempt to conceal their gender identities in order to avoid violence in transit.

**“They hit me, they tried to kill me, they were looking for me, for the same reason, just because I was gay, and there was nowhere to hide.” - Carlos, Honduran LGBTIQ migrant in Mexico, interviewed 2017**<sup>40</sup>

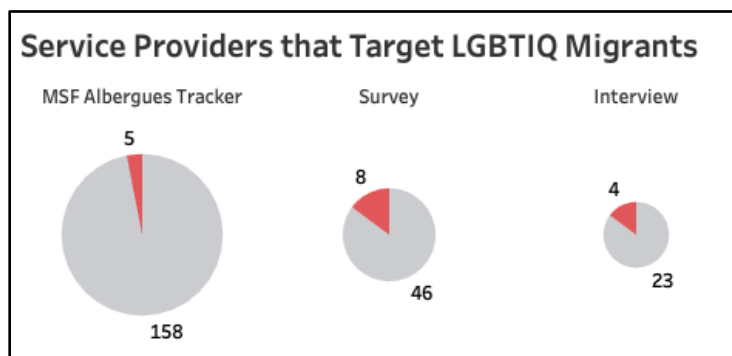
LGBTIQ migrants who flee northern Central American countries in search of safety are confronted with a similar context of discrimination and violence in Mexico. Negative social attitudes toward LGBTIQ people are prevalent in Mexico. LGBTIQ individuals are at risk of kidnapping, extortion, human trafficking, rape, and murder at the hands of violent drug cartels. There is little recourse for victims of these crimes as police officers in Mexico are known to target trans women with arbitrary arrests, extortion, and physical and sexual

abuse.<sup>1</sup> SIPA survey respondents listed LGBTIQ people as the second most common target of violence in Mexico, behind young women (18-31 years old). One interviewee highlighted how the intersection of these circumstances compound vulnerability for LGBTIQ migrants:

Yes, all populations that migrate are vulnerable, but within vulnerability there is more and less. Because they are [LGBTIQ], because they migrate, because they have HIV, because they are trans ... they all add up...they do not find work or housing options.... Violence is exerted everywhere. There is structural violence and there is invisible violence... it is hidden... it is not seen. – *Direct Service Provider, Southern Mexico and Central America region*

Additionally, the needs of the LGBTIQ population are often overlooked in humanitarian response. MSF tracks albergues that serve migrants throughout Mexico. Out of the 158 albergues in MSF’s tracker, only five specifically serve LGBTIQ migrants (2.5%) (see figure “Service Providers that Specifically Target LGBTIQ”)

Of note, a greater percentage of direct service providers who participated in SIPA study specifically serve LGBTIQ migrants. On average, SIPA survey respondents estimated that LGBTIQ migrants make up approximately 13% of the population they serve. Interviews with providers who serve LGBTIQ migrants revealed an under-resourced environment in Mexico in which LGBTIQ needs are vastly overlooked and there is limited knowledge related to



sexual and mental health. Access to more typical services is also limited for LGBTIQ migrants, including housing, food, clothing, livelihoods, and education. Within a context of widespread impunity and corruption, LGBTIQ migrants’ access to justice is even further limited because many Mexican human rights organizations have ties to the Catholic church and will not engage with LGBTIQ issues.

LGBTIQ migrants who traverse this context of limited protection and support and make it to the U.S.-Mexico border are then confronted with a third context of violence. While a provision in MPP states that vulnerable populations may be excluded from the policy, LGBTIQ asylum seekers have not been considered part of this exception.<sup>24</sup> The border encampments are dangerous for all migrants, but are particularly dangerous for LGBTIQ asylum seekers who experience targeted harassment and violence from drug cartels.<sup>25</sup>

## Unaccompanied Children

According to UNHCR, the U.S. Government began recording a dramatic increase in the number of unaccompanied and separated minors arriving to the U.S. from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala in 2011.<sup>26</sup> The total number of apprehensions of unaccompanied and separated children from these countries by CBP rose from just over 4,000 in 2011 to more than 21,500 in 2013.<sup>26</sup> In 2014, there were nearly 68,000 encounters of unaccompanied children from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico recorded by CBP.<sup>27</sup>

Children and teenagers are common targets of gang violence and forced recruitment by organized crime. Often, they leave home in search of safety and protection. Along the migration route, unaccompanied children are vulnerable to similar violence, extortion, forced recruitment, and kidnappings, as well as

**In El Salvador, there is a wrong—it's being young. You're stalked by gangs, authorities beat and follow kids because they don't trust them; they think they're gang members. There are no jobs for young people because employers don't trust the kids either... It is better to be old -**  
*Carlos, young migrant, interviewed 2012*<sup>41</sup>

detainment and deportation. They may also face challenges due to lack of awareness of legal protections. Additionally, children's needs may not be met due to gaps in service provision, including lack of mental health services and shelter capacity.

SIPA survey and interview findings generally support previous literature that indicates unaccompanied children are a particularly vulnerable population due to risks they face along the migration route, as well as legal and political barriers. Over 40% of SIPA survey respondents indicated that unaccompanied children are common targets of violence. Multiple interviewees expressed that unaccompanied minors are at high risk of being targeted by criminal groups. Additionally, the majority of SIPA survey

respondents identified unaccompanied children as one of the groups that has the greatest difficulty accessing services.

Interviewees also expressed concern that Mexico's policy preventing unaccompanied minors from staying at shelters has resulted in minors, particularly teenagers, living on the streets in order to avoid being detained. Interviewees perceived that the situation is getting worse, and teenagers are becoming more vulnerable to criminal recruitment and violence. A direct service provider that works in multiple locations expressed that teenagers are the "first targets" for organized crime when they are turned away by shelters.

At the U.S.-Mexico border in particular, cartels are able to exploit border-crossing by forcing children to smuggle illicit drugs or other irregular migrants into the U.S.<sup>28</sup> One service provider in the U.S.-Mexico border region described how this process sometimes becomes cyclical, with "circuit children" moving back and forth over the border and repeatedly performing these tasks in exchange for wages, in-kind compensation, or to work off their own smuggling fees.<sup>29</sup> Though cartels engage in the practice under the assumption that minors will appear less suspicious to U.S. law enforcement, children who are caught are subject to severe penalties under immigration law and are ineligible for most forms of immigration relief.<sup>28</sup>

## Black Migrants

Since 2019, Black migrants (including those from the Honduran Garifuna population as well as migrants from Haiti, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ghana, and Somalia) have been broadly stranded in Tapachula, a city in the southern state of Chiapas, as Mexican officials began issuing documents, *oficios de salida del país*, which require the recipient to leave Mexico only through the southern border.<sup>30</sup> This has effectively blocked Black migrants' continued journeys north. The exact number of Black migrants in Tapachula is unknown, but current estimates are in the thousands.<sup>31</sup> These figures, which are always difficult to ascertain due to the fluid nature of migration, are made more uncertain given that interviewees reported that Haitian migrants, in particular, often intentionally misreport their country of origin in an attempt to reduce discrimination and that the Garifuna are among the most overlooked and undiscussed migrating populations.

There is a long history of anti-Black racism in Mexico. Although Mexico has been inhabited by people of African descent since colonization, the existence of this population is rarely acknowledged.<sup>30</sup> This racism manifests in socio-economic conditions as "...35 percent of Mexicans who self-identify as dark skinned... fall in the bottom quartile of an index that measures occupational, educational, and economic indicators".<sup>30</sup>

Black migrants in Mexico therefore face compounded discrimination, based both in anti-Black racism and anti-migrant xenophobia.

Several interviewees explained that Black migrants face discrimination that is rooted in anti-Black racism in their interactions with government officials, service providers, and community members. Black migrants are disproportionately placed in detention where they are subjected to disparate treatment, face harassment, robbing, and physical attacks by police officers, are routinely denied jobs, housing, and education, and experience extreme social isolation.<sup>30,31</sup> One direct service provider noted “Black migrants...aren’t being visibilized at all and are very seldom able to get services.” Language barriers for Black migrants who do not speak Spanish was also repeatedly noted in interviews as a challenge that further limits these migrants’ access to services and protection. Such language barriers for migrants are known to enhance their risk of fraud and extortion and limit their understanding of their rights as well as the services and options available to them. On average, SIPA survey respondents indicated that 20% of the population they serve do not speak Spanish, and yet still there is limited access to translator services.

**“We passed through rivers and great hardship to arrive here and look at how they welcome us - with hate and racism.” - Adamo, Cameroonian migrant in Tapachula <sup>31</sup>**

Conditions are most severe for Black women migrants, who face gender-based discrimination in addition to discrimination on the basis of their race and migrant status, and who are most often unable to communicate in Spanish. One informant discussed how all these conditions intertwine:

It’s often a question of racism, anti-Black racism and xenophobia. I would also say Black women in particular face challenges, often because of sexism in the communities where they’re living in the southern part of Mexico, and not being able to communicate. Perhaps [service providers] not having any Haitian experience not having any Creole translators. [Black women migrants’] experience in health care, and their children’s education and in their immigration processes are totally being overlooked. – *Direct Service Provider, Central Mexico region*

Interviewees remarked that humanitarian actors have failed to speak out about the needs of Black migrants or to address the particular barriers they face in accessing services. They identified the need to better tailor services, in recognition of the multi-faceted discrimination that these populations encounter.

## Indigenous Migrants

The experiences of Indigenous people have historically been excluded from international migration frameworks, yet increasing numbers of Indigenous individuals and families are migrating from their homes globally.<sup>32</sup> As noted above, the disproportionate impacts of poverty, climate change, and systematic discrimination are major drivers of Indigenous migration from countries in northern Central America. More disaggregated data and focused research is needed to fully understand the impact of humanitarian crises, migration policies, climate change, and other factors on Indigenous communities, as well as Indigenous displacement and migration in Central America, Mexico, and the U.S. Qualitative research on Indigenous migrants’ experiences during the migration process is also lacking. However, the SIPA survey and interviews identified some of the specific challenges and unique needs experienced by Indigenous migrants during their journeys in Mexico.

In Mexico, policies related to formal identification requirements may curtail access to services among both Indigenous migrants and Mexicans. As a shelter in Central Mexico noted, federal requirements to show

official identification during travel - to purchase bus tickets or when stopped at checkpoints - effectively prevent people without formal documentation from traveling. This policy disproportionately curtails the mobility of Indigenous people, who are less likely to have formal identification documents.

Similar to Black migrants, Indigenous migrants face compounded discrimination based in both anti-Indigenous racism and anti-migrant xenophobia. In 2017, the UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples Rights, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, noted "...a serious pattern of exclusion and discrimination [in Mexico], which in turn reflects in a lack of access to justice, among other human rights violations."<sup>33</sup> Interviewees associated discrimination against Indigenous migrants with more negative migration outcomes, including higher rates of family separation and deportation relative to non-Indigenous migrants. One direct service provider cited how Indigenous Guatemalans, specifically, experience higher rates of family separation at the U.S.-Mexico border than non-Indigenous populations. The provider asserted that Indigenous people in the custody of CBP often lack access to interpreters and are coerced into signing paperwork in a moment of crisis at the border without fully understanding what the documents mean: "So if the majority of [separated families] are Indigenous, I wonder if there's a correlation there. Why were Indigenous people the ones deported more than others?" This disparate treatment is corroborated by the literature, as Obinna wrote in 2021, "Indigenous migrants are at greater risk for deportation, family separation, and death in CBP custody as a result of cultural and ethnic differences which are systematically ignored."<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, government agencies and direct service providers have often failed to meet the language access needs of Indigenous migrants and other diverse populations. As a result, non-Spanish speakers are more likely to be denied access to services or receive discriminatory treatment from authority figures. According to the SIPA survey, service providers estimate that approximately 45% of the migrants they serve suffer from lack of access to Indigenous language materials.

Access to high-quality translation services for Indigenous languages and dialects were weak or nonexistent among service providers. While providers could rely on platforms such as Google Translate for some languages, these tools were generally not available for Indigenous languages. One service provider serving multiple locations described the challenge of communicating with children without translation services: "You have to play with creativity and, you know, have some little cards and drawings and stuff... You do everything you can imagine. But there's not enough resources." This lack of resources likely contributes to the disparate rates of deportation and family separation experienced by Indigenous migrants.

## Communication & Information Sharing

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Migrants rely on a multitude of sources of information throughout their journeys. Up-to-date, accurate, and accessible information can be difficult to obtain, so migrants rely heavily on communities in their countries of origin, fellow migrants along the routes, and service providers, particularly shelters, to obtain information about conditions and resources along routes. Migrants then choose or adjust routes based on the points of greatest vigilance of the authorities, activities of organized crime groups, means of transport, distance, and cost.<sup>10,35,36</sup>

### Information Sharing

#### Information shared by service providers

Service providers are often selective about sharing information, because they operate in a liminal space between law enforcement (by the authorities) and unlawful behavior (by the undocumented migrants). As

a result, a substantial portion of information sharing takes place verbally, rather than through formal systems or news networks.<sup>37</sup>

Service providers may provide migrants with information about other service providers along the route and use digital technologies to maintain communication with them during and after their journeys. However, communication via email and smartphone does not work for all migrants. One organization providing low-cost legal services in the U.S. explained the challenge of reaching everyone with digital technologies:

It's easier when I'm working with a younger client on DACA to just send them an email and get an electronic signature... The burden is falling on our elderly clients and our clients who do not have the resources to use the internet. – *Direct Service Provider, United States*

Many service providers remarked that there is a dearth of information and capacity to share relevant legal information with migrants, given the shifting and complex nature of U.S. immigration law.

### Information sharing between migrants

Interview respondents described migrants exchanging information and advice about routes and services through word of mouth. According to one service provider working in Southern Mexico and Central America, informal, decentralized networks of family, friends, service providers and people they met during their journeys, created “an infrastructure of people who migrate.” Social media, particularly WhatsApp, serves as a platform for migrants to exchange information and contact service providers. As one service provider in the U.S.-Mexico border region said, “When [migrants] call me, they always say ‘Our friend gave me your number. He said that you will help me.’”

### **Lack of Information & Disinformation**

Disinformation about legal definitions and processes makes decision making difficult for migrants. Many follow a strategy of imitating friends and family members who have successfully relocated to the U.S.<sup>19</sup> Interviewees acknowledged the information shared through social networks is not always accurate. Returnees and deportees in particular may withhold information due to the intense stigma they face. According to one service provider working in multiple countries, returnees spoke about how difficult and dangerous the journey has become, but said “I haven’t shared this with my family... this is something that I don’t want to talk about [with them]”. Additionally, phone and internet access are limited by migrants’ constant movement, with some service providers pointing out that phones are likely to be stolen en route.

### Lack of Information on Asylum

Lack of information among migrants has been cited as a key reason that few asylum petitions from Central Americans are accepted in Mexico, where many migrants are dissuaded from applying due to a lack of information and access to the process.<sup>38</sup> Providing information and education about rights and legal processes to migrants at shelters has been presented as a means of pressuring state institutions to fulfill their legal obligations to protect asylum seekers.<sup>9</sup>

### **Communication with Authorities & Smuggling Networks**

Interviewees noted that government officials and public announcements are also a source of information for migrants. However, like other sources, this information is not necessarily correct and up-to-date, in part because policies and practices change rapidly. Mistrust of authorities limits communication between migrants and government officials. Rather than communicate with authorities, migrants contact service providers for protection which, in many cases, service providers are ill-equipped to provide. A provider from a shelter working near the U.S.-Mexico border described this situation, saying “They call us... it’s like an emergency. And we don’t have the capacity. I mean, we are not 911... We cannot give them protection.”

Migrants' reliance on smuggling networks further disincentives communication with authorities. Within smuggling operations, migrants are reliant on information from the smugglers they hire. According to service providers working along the U.S.-Mexico border, rumors that traveling with children facilitate "getting in easier to the States" and rapid changes to MPP and other policies under the Biden Administration have reportedly contributed to an uptick in the number of migrants arriving with incorrect information. One interviewee proposed education for service provider staff as a strategy for correcting misinformation, saying "Part of [the solution] is going into shelters and doing training about... what happens to a kid when they cross".

## Recommendations

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The issues discussed in this report impact MSF through direct and indirect channels. The following recommendations aim to inform MSF's direct service provision, advocacy strategies, avenues for collaborating with partner organizations, and priorities for future research.

### Humanitarian Needs

#### **1. Ensure linguistically and culturally responsive care for non-Spanish and non-English speakers**

Given the high numbers of Haitian, Indigenous, and African migrants traveling in Mexico, develop mechanisms to ensure that migrants who do not speak Spanish have equal access to information and services. Adapt services to accommodate cultural differences between migrants, ensuring routine translation of written materials into relevant languages, and consistently providing real-time audio translation. Consider connecting with MSF teams in Haiti, Central and South America, and/or Africa to support translation services.

#### **2. Expand trauma informed delivery of aid to include multiple, overlapping vulnerable populations**

Ensure the provision of mental health services, sexual and reproductive health services, and other services recognizes and responds appropriately to the multiple and overlapping identities that shape migrants' vulnerability to violence, discrimination and other sources of trauma before and during their journeys.

#### **3. Re-distribute resources to local advocates and service providers in the northern countries of Central America**

Strengthening the provision of resources to locally based organizations via sub-granting through MSF and advocating to funders could help expand the network of advocates and humanitarians working to protect vulnerable populations in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, thereby improving service delivery, access to information, and networks for collaboration.

#### **4. Promote continuity of care for people on the move**

Assess how MSF can best ensure that migrants maintain access to services (medical, social, legal) while on the move. Possible strategies include:

- Strengthening collaboration with case management service providers.
- Supporting a more robust system of referrals between different locations and across sectors.

- Ensuring referrals are tracked and making the referral system more accessible to smaller organizations.
- Exploring how referrals to remote/virtual services might reduce gaps in service provision and supporting migrants in connecting to remote services, with a particular focus on older migrants, migrants who speak languages not widely used online, and others with limited access to remote services.

## Improving MSF's Situational Understanding

### ● **Develop infrastructure for routine data collection**

MSF collects large amounts of data through its existing, routine service delivery. This information could be operationalized to help MSF staff better understand emerging migrations trends and patterns that may require new intervention approaches.

- **Albergue tracker:** Implement routine, digital data collection strategies to complement and improve efficiency of existing systems. Expand questions in the albergues tracker to **better** understand the availability of services to traditionally unseen and underserved groups.
- **Document health needs:** In 2019, MSF staff in Mexico conducted over 50,000 medical consultations with migrants, deportees, and community members in need. Routine data collection on health needs can be de-identified and analyzed to improve understanding of migrants' health needs to inform service provision and advocacy. This data could also be used to create an epidemiologic surveillance system for violence to improve understanding of the types of violence experienced by migrants, migrants' differing risk profiles for experiencing violence, and geographies of violence within Mexico.

### ● **Expand and formalize collaboration with direct service providers**

Interviewees highlighted the importance of MSF's role in Mexico's humanitarian response and emphasized the need to improve collaboration and referrals. Possible strategies include:

- Hiring a dedicated person to help build and maintain networks with partners.
- Developing strategies to safely provide and collect information through informal networks of migrants and service providers.
- Working with partners to identify specific funding opportunities to support network-building, which is cost prohibitive to many organizations.

## Future Areas of Research

Given the rapidly changing context of migration in Central America and Mexico, there are a number of areas for further research to support efforts to address evolving humanitarian needs in the region. Below are a few of the most pressing issues identified by the SIPA team.

### Immediate Research Needs

1. **COVID-19:** Track service providers' ongoing needs for COVID-19 testing and isolation facilities as vaccine rollout gains speed. Assess levels of access to COVID-19 vaccines among migrants and frontline service providers.
2. **Legal aid:** Stakeholder analysis of U.S.-based and cross-border legal aid organizations that support migrants with asylum, family reunification, and work visa applications.

3. **Services in Central America:** Conduct a stakeholder analysis of migrant shelters and direct service providers in Central American countries.
4. **Violence in Central America:** Analyze trends and patterns of violence in northern Central America to identify where and what humanitarian services are most needed in the region.
5. **Language needs:** Evaluate the range of languages spoken by direct service providers, the translation services available. Map the locations most in need of stronger translation services and identify the language skills that are most needed to improve services for migrants.
6. **Mexican migration:** Analyze a potential increase in the numbers of forcibly displaced Mexicans migrating to the U.S. and assess their needs.
7. **Indigenous migration:** Analyze the rates at which Indigenous communities are forcibly displaced in northern Central America and Mexico and assess Indigenous migrants' experiences and needs along the migration route.

#### Long-term Research Needs

1. **Violence data:** Collate and triangulate existing data on violence in Mexico and Central America to gain more nuanced understanding of changing violence trends and corresponding needs for services over time and by location. Identify where more disaggregation is needed to adequately capture the needs of traditionally unseen and underserved groups.
2. **People turned away:** Investigate what happens to migrants when they are turned away from the border, including mental and physical health consequences. Assess whether wait times impact these outcomes and consider how findings can be tied to advocacy strategies for policy change.
3. **Health impacts of metering:** Investigate the relationship between duration of wait times at the U.S.-Mexico border and health outcomes of migrants. Consider implications for advocacy strategies for policy change.

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## Appendix A: Drivers of Migration

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### Violence Driving Forced Migration

Previous research indicates that Central American migration today is overwhelmingly a forced displacement - not an economic migration - phenomenon. A 2014 study by Douglas Massey, Jorge Durand, and Karen A. Pren, which analyzes migration data from 1987, asserts that violence is the only contextual factor that has a detectable effect on the odds of an individual from northern countries of Central America taking a first undocumented trip to the U.S.<sup>1</sup> The same study found no evidence that Central Americans respond to either rising U.S. border enforcement or shifts in U.S. labor demand.

#### Historical Perspectives

Though migration flows from northern countries of Central America to Mexico and the U.S. has increased dramatically in the last ten years, Central Americans have embarked on this dangerous journey to escape violence at home for decades. The first wave of large undocumented migrant flows from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras coincides directly with the upsurge in political violence associated with the Reagan administration's interventionist Cold War policies in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> These policies broadly propped up brutal right wing military regimes and stoked civil wars and widespread abuse.<sup>2</sup> Although the civil wars concluded in the 1990s, the region never fully stabilized politically or economically.<sup>1</sup>

The difficult recovery was exacerbated as the United States' militarized and counterproductive approach to the War on Drugs promoted a resurgence of violence in the region.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the 2000s, countries in northern Central America became the "transshipment point for an overwhelming majority of cocaine...and [saw] a greater presence of violent Mexican organized crime groups."<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously in the U.S., some undocumented migrants with limited livelihood options turned to gangs. These gang members were apprehended, then deported, creating transnational gang networks. Together, gang and organized crime-related violence rose in Central America in the 2000s to replace the political violence of the 1980s.<sup>1</sup>

#### Current Reality

Today, countries in northern Central America have homicide rates that are among the highest in the world.<sup>4</sup> In each of these states, violence is magnified by the flawed transitions following civil conflict wherein new institutions have thus far failed to strengthen the rule of law.<sup>5</sup> Gangs have become increasingly predatory throughout the region, "...the local populations in the territories they control [often face] exorbitant extortions and forced cooperation under threat of violence and death."<sup>6</sup> Many interviewees corroborated these findings, identifying violence as the primary push factor of migration. In the past, vulnerable populations and those with economic motivations made up the majority of migrants, but today constant threats of violence and extortion are pushing the general population to move.

Several interviewees highlighted that the escalating flow of migration, in spite of the risks, is itself a demonstration of the dire circumstances in the northern Central American countries. The migratory journey through Mexico has become notoriously dangerous: migrants often encounter the same gangs and cartels in Mexico which pushed them to flee Central America. According to one interviewee, at most 30% of migrants actually make it to the U.S. border. In spite of this, thousands of Central Americans are moving as migration is their only option.

## Other Drivers of Migration

While many interviewees identified violence as the primary push factor of migration, several also asserted that migration is multi-dimensional and that, in many cases, a range of complex motivations combine and result in migration.

### Basic Needs

In addition to their deficiencies in curbing violence, weak institutions throughout northern Central American countries magnify social exclusion, poverty, and inequality, depriving "...large segments of the populations of the minimal conditions necessary to survive."<sup>5</sup> Several interviewees emphasized that the inability to meet basic survival needs is a strong motivation for migration, and has recently been exacerbated further by the COVID-19 pandemic. Weak states also reduce the resilience of their populations in the face of extreme weather events. For example, the scale of migrant flows from Honduras began to grow significantly after Hurricane Mitch in 1998. The hurricane caused crop failures, damaged roads, schools, and the healthcare network, and left 10% of the population homeless.<sup>7</sup> One interviewee asserted that hurricanes alone do not cause increases in migration, but rather state inability to support populations through emergencies.

### Targeted Populations

Several interviewees underscored that specific populations in northern Central American countries face generalized societal violence and poverty, compounded further by targeted discrimination based on their identities. This enhances the likelihood that these groups will migrate. Indigenous populations face poverty at proportionally higher rates than general populations in the northern countries of Central America and are also disproportionately impacted by crop unreliability and food insecurity.<sup>8,9</sup> According to Asociación Pop No'j, an indigenous rights organization in Guatemala, the majority of migrants leaving Guatemala are indigenous. LGBTIQ individuals face widespread societal stigma across the region: abuse in the home forces them to flee their communities, targeted violence from gangs and state actors forces them to flee their countries, and social and economic exclusion often leaves sex work as the only option to fund their journey through Mexico, exposing them to further risks.<sup>10</sup> Children and youth are at heightened risk of kidnapping, trafficking, and gang recruitment. Several interviewees explained that cartels view young men, in particular, as "merchandise": they are kidnapped and their families are then extorted for ransom money or they are trafficked as agricultural labor within the drug economy. Boys are targeted for gang recruitment and may face persecution if they resist or attempt to leave once already inside of a gang. Finally, women are at heightened risk of gender-based violence and flee due to abuse from a range of actors. One interviewee stressed that domestic violence, in particular, is a major push factor for women from northern countries of Central America, in addition to violence at the hands of cartels and the state.

**"The gang members were persecuting and threatening me... They used to tell me that they were going to kill me and my children... they had already killed two of [my friend's] brothers, because he was a gang member... They were upset with the father of my children and wanted money." - Indigenous migrant from Honduras, interviewed 2015<sup>4</sup>**

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### Family Reunification

Given that migration from northern countries of Central America to the U.S. has been a recurrent trend since the 1980s, family reunification has served as a strong and consistent motivating factor for migration.<sup>1</sup> Interviewees suggested that this motivation has been recently magnified by family separation related to deportation.

## Multi-directional Migration

Those departing Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador for Mexico and the U.S. are often on their second journey because they have either been deported after a previous migration attempt or because they are displaced in Central America from a country of origin outside the region. Central America is also a region of transit for many migrants, so some are passing through these countries without intent to stay. Additionally, most migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, or El Salvador were internally displaced before crossing the border.

### Haitian and African Migrants

Several interviewees called attention to the needs of Haitian and African migrants who had been previously displaced to Central or South America and are now experiencing their second displacement to Mexico. Large scale Haitian migration began after the 2010 earthquake that devastated Port-au-Prince and surrounding areas. Many of these migrants now fear returning to Haiti due to increased generalized violence.<sup>11</sup> African migration has become more prevalent in Mexico since migration to Europe became more difficult in 2015. African migrants are largely from Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ghana, and Somalia. While push factors vary depending on country of origin, they generally include a combination of "...civil wars and violence (including [gender-based violence]), political instability, poor standard of living, persecution based on sexual orientation or gender identity, or the desire for better economic opportunities."<sup>12</sup>

### Mexican Migrants

Other interviewees expressed concern over mounting push factors within Mexico itself. While migration from Mexico to the U.S. from the 1970s to early 2000s was the largest wave of immigration from a single country to the U.S. in history, in 2012, Pew reported that these historic flows had hit net zero.<sup>13</sup> Observations by informants, however, suggest that flows from Mexico into the U.S. may once again be increasing. Several experts and service providers who operate in or near Tijuana asserted that the current scale of Mexican displacement is underreported, that many people, particularly women and families, are currently fleeing violence in Mexico, and identified intimate partners and organized crime as the primary perpetrators of violence. One informant noted a trend of intimate partner violence driving migration among Mexican women specifically from Oaxaca and Michoacán. Several informants also highlighted that confinement due to COVID-19 restrictions has exacerbated gender-based violence and is directly related to this shift.

### Returnees

Finally, several interviewees highlighted conditions that are pushing migrants to return to Mexico from the U.S. One direct service provider in Central Mexico explained that the opportunities available to migrants in the U.S., and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients in particular, varies dramatically state by state. Many encounter numerous barriers in accessing education and livelihoods and, as a result, return to Mexico where they then find limited support and language barriers.

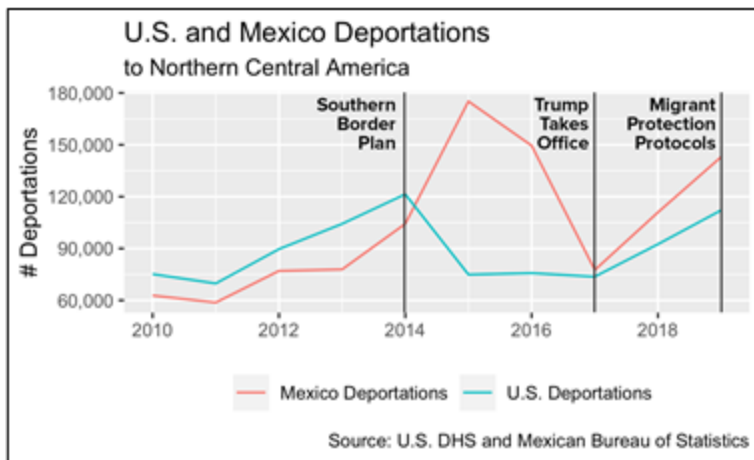
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## Appendix B: Migration Trends & Policy Landscape

Over the last 10 years, the U.S. and Mexican governments have enacted increasingly restrictive policies attempting to reduce migration and limit asylum access. Despite militarization of the borders and expanded immigration enforcement, a growing number of migrants from northern countries of Central America have continued to travel towards the United States. Although Mexico passed promising migration reforms in 2011, the administration of Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018)



changed course with the 2014 Southern Border Plan leading to a spike in Mexican deportations to Central America. After U.S. President Donald Trump (2017-2021) took office, both U.S. deportations and apprehensions at the Southwest border began to rise, likely reflecting an increase in both enforcement policy as well as the spike in migrants from Central America in 2019. During the COVID-19 pandemic, detention and apprehension figures for both Mexico and the U.S. declined significantly from previous years. However, these figures are already on the rise again in the early months of the Biden administration.

### 2011-2017

#### Liberalization of Mexico's Migration Policies

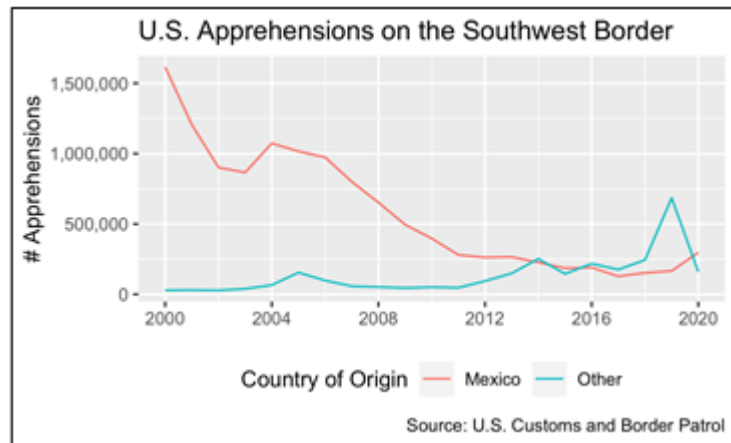
The Mexican government passed several progressive immigration policies in 2011, in part due to political pressure caused by a series of violent attacks against migrants.<sup>1</sup> This included the Law on Refugees, Complementary Protection, and Political Asylum, which expanded the definition of refugee status, and a revision of the Migration Law intended to enhance migrant rights and protections, in part through temporary regularization via the humanitarian visas (*tarjetas de visitante por razones humanitarias/TVRH*) program. At the time, a number of Mexican civil society organizations were skeptical about the implementation of these changes. Many of the rights granted by these policies remain unrealized to this day.<sup>1</sup>

#### Southern Border Plan (Plan Frontera Sur)

Following an influx of Central American families and children crossing into Southern Mexico in 2014, and with the encouragement of the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama (2009-2017), the Peña Nieto administration announced the Southern Border Plan, targeted at increasing border security.<sup>2</sup> The first year the plan was implemented, the number of deportations of Central American migrants spiked by 68%. This increase in deportations from Mexico coincided with a sharp decrease in deportations from the United States, which dropped by 38% over the same period. The Southern Border Plan effectively erected a “vertical border” by reducing the flow of Central American migrants into the United States. Although the Southern Border Plan was ostensibly implemented to give “migration policies a dignified and human face ... to promote well-being at the borders”, in reality, it forced migrants to take increasingly dangerous routes.<sup>3</sup> As Galemba et. al. noted, “Rather than assisting with migrant protection and dismantling smuggling, enhanced immigration policing is associated with increased abuses against migrants, particularly along the Mexico–Guatemala border.”<sup>4</sup>

## Trump Era (2017-2020)

In March of 2018, when the first migrant caravan left Honduras en route to the U.S., the Trump Administration launched a battery of harmful policies aimed at deterring migration. Increasing numbers of migrants seeking asylum in the U.S. coincided with a jump in apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexico border in 2019,<sup>5</sup> reaching rates of over 850,000 -- although these were still far below the historic record of 1.6 million apprehensions in 2000.<sup>6</sup> The Trump Administration responded with sweeping changes to asylum procedures aimed at restricting access to the asylum system.<sup>7</sup>



During the Trump administration, simultaneous with eroding the few protections that existed, all of that was also wrapped with a very conscious effort to externalize U.S. immigration policy, and really to push Mexico and Central America to do their part, to make sure that they stopped the flows so that the U.S. would not even have to bother with that issue. – *Direct Service Provider, Multiple locations*

### Zero Tolerance Policy

On April 2, 2018, U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced a “zero-tolerance” policy that criminalized unauthorized entry into the U.S. Soon after the policy was announced, reports emerged of unauthorized adult immigrant parents being separated from their children to be criminally prosecuted. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), nearly 3,000 children were separated from their parents under the policy before President Trump signed an executive order to stop family separation in June 2018.<sup>8</sup> Despite its implementation, the policy did little to deter migration, and the rate of families crossing the U.S.-Mexico border remained the same over the next several months.<sup>9</sup>

### Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP)

The United States Department of Homeland Security announced the implementation of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) in January 2019. Also known as the “Remain in Mexico” program, MPP returned non-Mexican asylum seekers to often dangerous locations in Mexico while their asylum claims were being heard in U.S. immigration courts. According to HRW, by November 2019, over 56,000 asylum seekers had been sent back to wait in Mexico. As of January 2020, less than 1% of asylum seekers in MPP had been granted protection in the U.S.<sup>10</sup> By 2021, Human Rights First had tracked at least 1,300 public reports of human rights abuses against people forcibly returned to Mexico under the policy.<sup>11</sup> Upon taking office, U.S. President Joseph Biden (2021-present) suspended new enrollments to MPP,<sup>12</sup> and on February 19, 2021, the Department of Homeland Security began phase one of processing remaining cases under MPP with the goal to “restore safe and orderly processing at the southwest border.”<sup>13</sup>

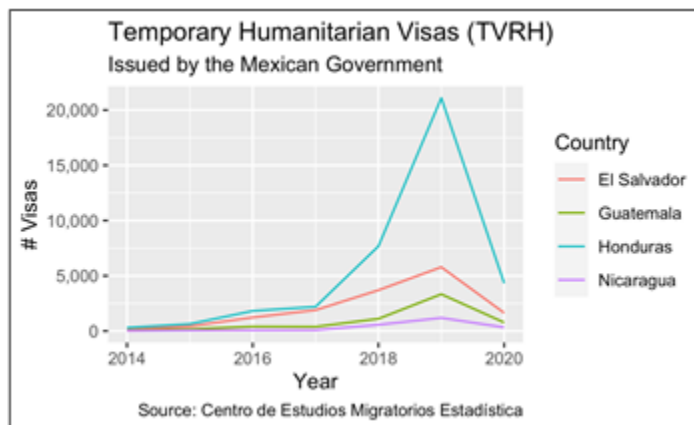
### Safe Third-Country Agreements

The Trump Administration signed “safe third country” agreements with Central American governments, which prevent migrants from seeking asylum in the U.S. if they travel through another country first. These agreements and other measures by the Trump Administration to clamp down on migration appeared to

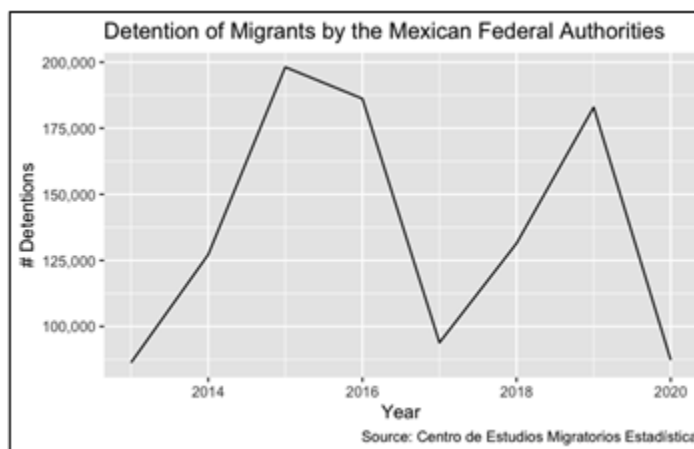
have reduced migrant apprehensions at the southern U.S. border by 2020 according to Customs and Border Protection figures published by the Hill.<sup>14</sup>

### Increased Immigration Enforcement in Mexico

In early 2019 the Mexican government rapidly scaled up the issuance of humanitarian visas, allowing tens of thousands of migrants to obtain temporary legal status during transit through the country. However, by March of the same year, the National Migration Institute dramatically reduced the number of humanitarian visas under pressure from the U.S. government, including a threat to introduce tariffs on all Mexican imports by 5% if the country did not take action to stem the flow of migrants from its southern border.<sup>15</sup>



During this year, deportations of Central American migrants rose in both the U.S. and Mexico, due in part to the U.S.-Mexico Migration deal in which Mexico agreed to deport more migrants and divert the National Guard to police the border. As one direct service provider from Central Mexico stressed, while the threat of U.S. tariffs played a role in Mexico’s increased enforcement efforts, there was also a “big effort policy wise within Mexico to make immigration a security issue.” The number of apprehensions of migrants by Mexico increased in 2019: according to Pew Research Center, Mexican authorities increased migrant apprehensions by 32% more than the same period in 2018. 85% of the migrants apprehended were from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.<sup>16</sup>



### Asylum in Mexico

Although Mexico’s asylum system appears more generous than the United States’, it is still plagued with challenges.<sup>17</sup> Mexico’s Law on Refugees, Complementary Protection, and Political Asylum recognizes “generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights, or other circumstances that have seriously affected public order” as means for asylum applications. The law was later expanded to “recognize gender-based persecution; sexual, domestic, and family violence; and persecution by both state and nonstate actors as grounds for refugee status.”<sup>17</sup>

Since 2013, asylum seekers in Mexico’s Refugee Aid Commission (COMAR) have increased from 1296 to 29,630 by the end of 2018, leading to an influx of cases.<sup>18</sup> Before 2016, COMAR was able to meet its legal requirement of responding to asylum applications within 45 days. Yet, in 2017, operations at COMAR were paused creating a backlog of 80%. In 2019, COMAR recorded 70,426 people seeking asylum, which is the highest number ever received.<sup>19</sup> Despite COVID-19, during 2020 there were a total of 41,212 applicants,

making it the year with the second highest number in history.<sup>19</sup> Mexico also has a very high denial rate of asylum, according to TRAC 90% of asylum applications are denied.<sup>20</sup>

### COVID-19 Restrictions

Government restrictions on movement at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, including lockdowns, border closures, and curfews throughout the region, contributed to a decrease in apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexico border in 2020.<sup>21</sup> Of note, there was a roughly 50% drop in apprehensions in the U.S.-Mexico border in 2020 and Mexicans outnumbered non-Mexicans detained, which is a reversal of previous years' trends.<sup>22</sup>

The U.S. government capitalized on the COVID-19 pandemic to further curtail the right to seek asylum by deporting asylum-seekers before they have the chance to make their claims. At the onset of the pandemic, the Trump administration put in place Title 42, a restrictive policy that closed the border to “nonessential” travel.<sup>23</sup> Under Title 42, hundreds of thousands of families, adults and unaccompanied minors have been expelled without due process. Such actions are based on flawed public health arguments and violate long-standing conventions related to the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers.

As one direct service provider in the U.S. explained, “Once Title 42 was implemented, it became almost impossible for children to access the U.S.-Mexico border, and we saw numbers of children in U.S. custody drop as a result.” According to the Los Angeles Times, Title 42, which has never been used before to regulate immigration, has been applied to more than 80% of encounters with migrants.<sup>23</sup> Less than 1% of migrants who encounter Title 42 have passed the screenings that would allow them to seek asylum in the U.S.

### **Biden Era (2021 - Present)**

The number of migrants apprehended on the U.S. border is once again on the rise. According to Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas, “We are on pace to encounter more individuals on the southwest border than we have in the last 20 years.”<sup>24</sup> Some see Biden’s perceived openness towards migration as a new driver: according to Reuters, “gangs are diversifying methods of smuggling and winning clients as they eye U.S. measures that will ‘incentivize migration.’”<sup>25</sup> While some interviewees corroborated this view, others expressed concern that these new trends may be exaggerated and cautioned that they could soon be leveraged to justify reactionary, short-sighted, and restrictive immigration policies.

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## Appendix C: Returnees and Deportees

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There is this narrative and this **stigma about returning** because it's only understood as a failure. And you don't share failures. [During interviews], individuals who returned spoke about how difficult the journey has become, how dangerous the journey has become, and many of them said, 'But **I haven't shared this with my family**, or this is something that I don't want to talk about.' So, there's less information about it. – *Direct Service Provider, multiple locations*

Deportation statistics are frequently used to understand migration trends and frame discussions about immigration policies and enforcement, yet the human impact of deportation is rarely discussed. No government systematically monitors individuals after they are deported, and often aid groups do not have adequate resources to track what happens to deportees and returnees. A direct service provider from the Central Mexico region noted that “people don't really talk about what happens to communities after being deported - at the organizing level, even within families and communities, and obviously the government [doesn't talk about what happens].” Often, the needs of these communities go unseen.

### Violence and Other Abuse

Previous research indicates that deportees face increased vulnerabilities in Mexico and Central America when they return. A report by Human Rights Watch assessing U.S. deportation policies and the dangers Salvadoran migrants face when they are deported found that some deportees were killed following their return to El Salvador. In other instances, deportees faced torture, sexual violence, and other harm, often perpetrated by gangs.<sup>1</sup> A study by political scientists for the Washington Post found that deportees in Guatemala face abuse by gangs, harassment by the authorities, and struggle to find employment opportunities. The study also found that due to these factors, deportees were more likely to attempt to re-migrate to the U.S. than non-deportees.<sup>2</sup> A direct service provider serving multiple locations emphasized that deportations under Title 42 have been particularly harmful to migrants. The service provider went on to say that non-Mexicans deported to Mexico are particularly vulnerable. Recent deportees face “a lot of abuses from Mexican authorities, from extortion to [other forms of abuses]” and issues with documentation leave them in a “very, very, very vulnerable situation.”

**“Now that these men know... [my wife and child] have returned, and that they failed in trying to escape, they are even more seriously pursuing them both, demanding that both of them sell drugs for the gang now or that the gang will make both of them ‘disappear.’”** - *Husband of Salvadoran deportee, interviewed 2016*<sup>3</sup>

### Documentation

According to a service provider in Central Mexico, children born in, but not registered as citizens in Mexico who have been deported after migrating to the U.S. have no form of identification when they return to Mexico, which is a major barrier to accessing services. Another service provider in Central Mexico noted that when Mexican families with U.S. citizen children are deported, the children cannot exercise their rights as Mexican citizens.

They're not allowed to go to school because they don't have the right papers [...] from the 2010 census to the 2015 census in Mexico, there were more than 500,000 U.S. citizen children living in Mexico with their parents and more than half of them did not have dual nationality. So that's more than 250,000 children who possibly can't go to school. It's a big problem. – *Direct Service Provider, Central Mexico region*

## Challenges with Reintegration

Of note, some migrants are deported or voluntarily return after living in the U.S. for the majority of their lives. Interview respondents identified these deportees and returnees as a population with unique needs. A direct service provider in Central Mexico quoted earlier in this section expressed that this population is overlooked by the government because “there is no political agenda for the deported and returned.” Many returnees and deportees who have lived in the U.S. for the majority of their lives face language barriers and other challenges related to reintegration. According to another service provider in Central Mexico quoted earlier in this section, ex-DACA recipients who return to Mexico often “don't have a support system that's willing to help them [...] They don't have a university that's willing to accept them. They want to [...] work for a certain company, and they don't have a company that's willing to accept them.” The provider emphasized that this pattern was also apparent in recreational activities. “They don't know about Mexican culture and that's difficult. They're discriminated against because of the way they look or the way they dress.” In spite of these myriad challenges, little is being done by governments to support deportees.

## Biden Administration

Service providers and others were skeptical that the change in U.S. administration would lead to better outcomes for deportees. A service provider from Central Mexico quoted earlier in this section expressed hope that immigration reform would provide more migrants with the ability to obtain legal status, but stressed that “those who don't fill the requirements are going to be in the same situation they're in right now – some of them may be deported and some of them are going to return to Mexico.” A research organization in Mexico noted that policies which prioritize regularization tend to sideline discussions about deportation. The service provider emphasized that Biden Administration policies will focus on regularization and pathways to citizenship while people continue to be deported, leading to an “incongruity in the discourse – more security of permanence for one population, but not for others.”

## Advocacy

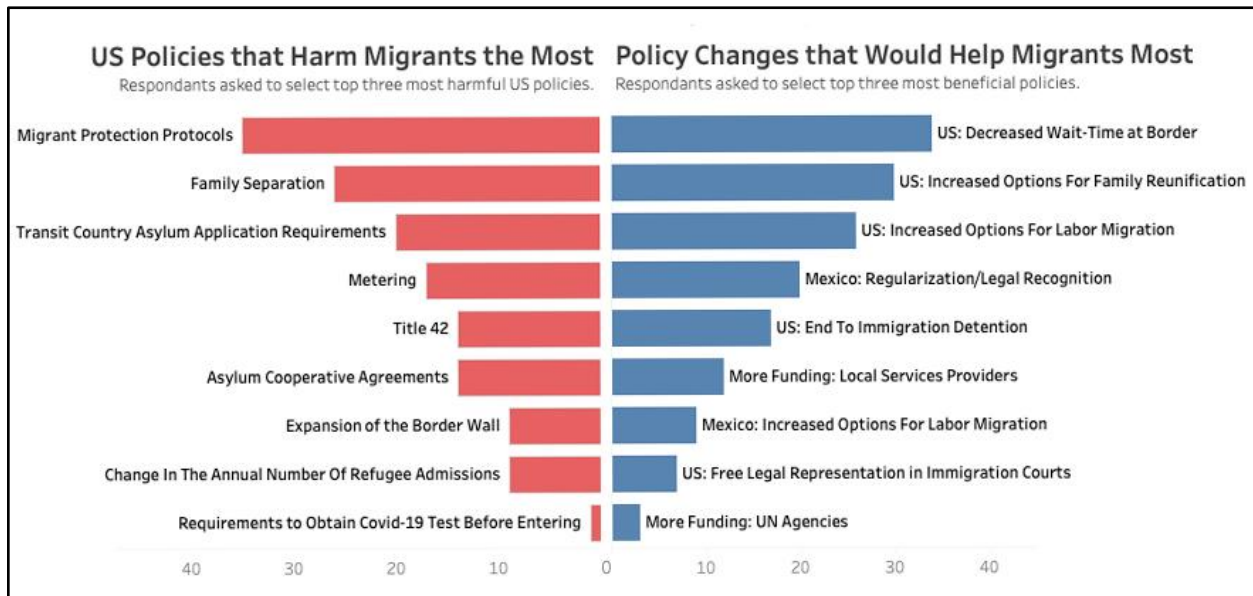
While there is still a gap in returnee/deportee-led organizations in Mexico, policy advocacy on behalf of this population is a priority, both for organizations in Mexico and in the U.S. One service provider in Central Mexico quoted earlier in this section discussed that advocacy often takes place within the traditional migration space. However, service providers and governments often assume that deportees and returnees don't face the same challenges as other migrants when they have Mexican birth certificates. “It is different, but there's other things that deported and returned communities go through that should be addressed, specifically around health and identity documents.” The service provider emphasized that “having citizenship is not enough.”

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## Appendix D: U.S. Policies & Biden Administration Priorities



President Biden campaigned on the reversal of many key Trump-era immigration reforms and within his first week in office had issued a battery of executive orders and presidential proclamations rolling back several high-profile policies including the national emergency at the U.S.-Mexico border and construction of the border wall. Despite these positive steps, communities with less media attention in the United States are likely to face similar challenges under Biden as under Trump. As direct service provider explained,

If you look at the big picture trend, the more the figurative border is pushed further south, the less U.S. citizens see and care. And that's a big concern of mine, because out of sight, out of mind is just so real. I mean, people were up in arms about kids in cages on U.S. soil. How much do people care about MPP? – *Direct Service Provider, Multiple Locations*

Despite promising rhetoric, it will be critical for advocates to maintain pressure on the Biden administration to enact meaningful reform.

### Addressing the Root Causes of Migration

In February Biden issued an executive order indicating a willingness to address immigration in part through mitigating root causes and drivers of migration.<sup>1,2</sup> This order could provide an opening for increased U.S. funding in northern Central America, which was cut during the Trump administration. However, increased funding will only go so far to address the root causes of displacement, and several interviewees stressed the need for a regional approach to migration policy.

It is urgent that there be a regional migration policy from Central America to the United States. Truly planned out collectively, with resources going towards the causes of forced migration in many countries, tackling the problem of organized crime networks, human trafficking, drug traffickers that harass migrants, taking into account and making resources available for employment in each country, in transit countries, in the United States, with necessary documents, temporary or definitive. – *Survey Respondent*

## Asylum Claims and Expulsions at the Border

Immediately after taking office, Biden put the MPP policy under review and stopped placing new asylum seekers into the program.<sup>3</sup> In another positive step, in February the U.S. State Department announced a suspension of the Asylum Cooperative Agreements.<sup>4</sup>

However, the U.S. border remains closed to most migrants due to Title 42, which Trump instituted in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a Biden administration spokesperson, the “vast majority” of migrants continue to be expelled under Title 42.<sup>5</sup> Advocacy groups including the ACLU have criticized the continued use of the policy as “flatly illegal”,<sup>6</sup> but thus far the Biden administration has maintained the Trump-era policy essentially unchanged besides the small but positive step of carving out protections for unaccompanied minors.

## Rethinking Deportation Priorities

One of Biden’s first executive orders after taking office, on the “Revision of Civil Immigration Enforcement Policies and Priorities,” counteracted one of Trump’s executive orders that target almost all undocumented immigrants for deportation regardless of their criminal status or family circumstances. A DHS memorandum following this executive order established narrow priorities for deportation targets in what has been noted is “an important shift in the way the executive branch thinks about who should be prioritized for deportation.”<sup>4</sup> These deportation targets are narrower than Obama deportation priorities, focusing only on those with an aggravated felony rather than any type of criminal conviction.

## Structural Barriers to Reform

Reversing the damage that Trump-era policies have caused will be a long-term process. According to the Immigration Policy Tracking Project, the Trump administration altered over 1,000 immigration policies.<sup>4</sup> As one expert from the U.S. pointed out, “The challenge is that Trump has dismantled the immigration system. The whole system doesn’t depend on Biden.” Additionally, many of the Biden administration’s changes to the system may be difficult to implement and enforce: Biden’s 100-day deportation moratorium has already been struck down in a Texas court.<sup>7</sup>

## Partisan Barriers to Reform

Although the U.S. House passed several immigration reform bills in March and House Democrats are pushing for comprehensive immigration reform, many lawmakers are skeptical that these bills will pass the Senate.<sup>8</sup> As *USA Today* reported “immigration is a hot-button issue for mobilizing Republicans in 2022,”<sup>9</sup> and the memory of Democrats losing their Senate majority in the 2010 after Obama’s first victory may shape the political calculus of lawmakers up for reelection in swing districts.<sup>10</sup> Several interviewees expressed frustration at the attempt to pass a comprehensive reform bill. As one direct service provider explained:

We believe that a comprehensive immigration reform is a recipe for disaster. For the last 20 years, we’ve learned that doesn’t work. Why are we trying that? Once again, all anyone who opposes has to do is simply target one bill and it is stopped. – *Direct service provider, Multiple locations*

The increasing flow of migrants arriving at the U.S. border may pose another political challenge to enacting meaningful reform. Republicans have latched onto the narrative of a growing crisis at the border to counter proposals for much-needed reform with calls for increased securitization.<sup>11</sup> At present, there seems to be more traction with policies that affect immigrants already in the U.S. including a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants.

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## Appendix E: COVID-19

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COVID-19 had profound impacts on migration from northern Central American countries in 2020 and early 2021. Although government restrictions on movement initially prevented people from leaving their homes and effectively reduced migration north in 2020, interviewees indicated that these reduced flows were short-lived. The failure of Central American governments to adequately respond to the pandemic compounded pre-existing violence and left populations with no means for work or survival. Many people therefore are still migrating despite added border security and health risks.

[People continued to move as] institutional violence both in their countries and in Mexico, which already existed, worsened with the pandemic. - *Direct Service Provider, U.S.-Mexico Border region*

This COVID-19 context in Mexico has had vast implications for the health and safety of migrants. Migrants traveling through Mexico are disproportionately poor, which means they are less likely to have access to sanitation, running water, and vaccinations.<sup>1</sup> Further, migrants who are able to find employment often work in informal sectors in businesses that cannot function remotely.<sup>1</sup> Finally, migrants at the border are living in crowded and often unsanitary tented settlements, where preventing the spread of infectious disease is difficult. All of these conditions compound migrants' vulnerability to COVID-19, within the context of a country with one of the most dangerous outbreaks in the world.

### Mexico's Federal Response and Capacity

The limited capacity of the Mexican government to respond to COVID-19 was a theme across interviews. Several direct service providers cited Mexico's failing healthcare system as a major source of strain. Prior to the start of the pandemic, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador cut spending on the public health and welfare agency by 44%, which contributed to a lack of essential medical equipment at the start of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> The federal response to the pandemic in Mexico was also slow, inconsistent, and initially minimized the gravity of the virus.<sup>2,3</sup> More recently, the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccines has been slow and inconsistent, "hampered by delays in delivery of doses due to bottlenecks in supply".<sup>4</sup> This dangerous combination of circumstances means that the situation across Mexico has been dire throughout 2020 and early 2021.

### COVID-driven violence

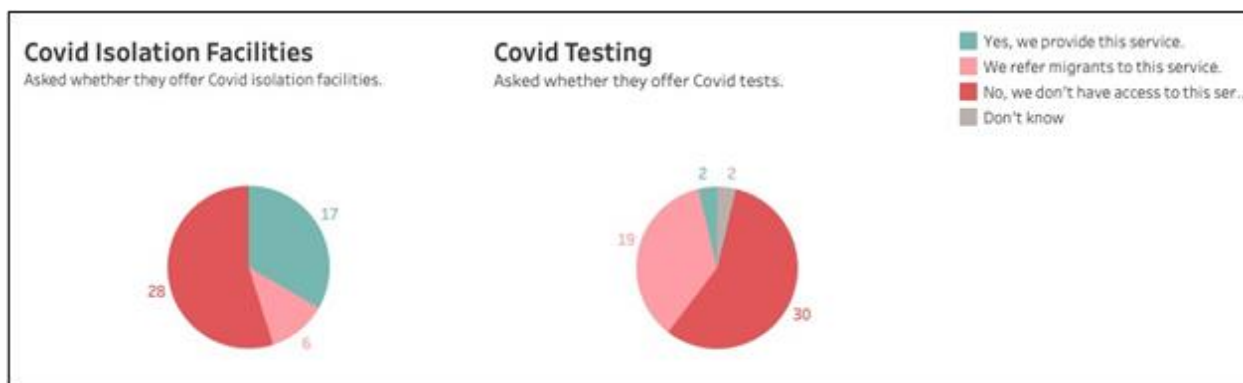
Violence against migrants has increased during the pandemic. One interviewee commented that Mexico's National Guard and the National Institute on Migration (INM)'s response to migrants during COVID-19 has become increasingly violent, including extorting migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border. Given border closures and increased institutional violence, migrants now increasingly rely on coyotes to support their journeys. However, coyotes are now charging more given the added difficulty, and traveling with coyotes puts migrants at greater risk for extortion, human trafficking, and sexual violence. Migrant safety is also compromised by community fears related to COVID-19, as migrants are viewed as potential vectors of disease and are routinely threatened and denied services.

**It has increased violence of state agents with COVID - the National Guard, the INM. Detained and deported from ICE, the INM detains them and extorts them at the immigration station if they did not pay amparo, they were going to deport them.** - *Direct Service Provider, U.S.-Mexico Border region*

Additionally, the Mexican government's weak response to the pandemic left an opening for organized criminal groups to expand their spheres of influence. Cartels have been delivering food packages and have been enforcing social distancing, particularly in crowded slum areas.<sup>2,3</sup> Though this might provide some short-term relief, in the long-run it will serve to further strengthen these criminal organizations and could increase instances of violence and extortion on the migratory journey.<sup>3</sup>

## Impacts on Direct Service Providers

COVID-19 has also affected how shelters and other direct service providers are able to operate. Some interviewees were able to adapt quickly to a virtual environment and used the pandemic as an opportunity to strengthen collaborations and community engagement. Others expanded the scope of their work to meet new community needs, such as PPE donations, hand washing stations, food distribution, financial support for bills, and health education. However, many others had to scale back on their efforts to support migrants during COVID-19. In particular, many albergues and volunteer-based direct service providers in Mexico closed due to health and safety concerns. Survey findings indicate that in March 2021 - one year after the pandemic began - over half of service providers still did not have any access to COVID-19 testing and isolation facilities, limiting their ability to put in place data-driven COVID-19 mitigation measures to protect staff, volunteers and migrants alike.



Further, as the situation in Mexico worsened throughout 2020, the Mexican government began to divert resources away from vital social programs that serve migrants. One expert explained that many shelters at the U.S.-Mexico border had their Mexican federal funding halted in 2020, causing a financial crisis. Rather than rely on the government's existing systems and programs for COVID-19, one direct service provider explained that their organization opted to pay for private services to ensure more timely and responsive care for migrants.

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## Appendix F: List of Named Participating Organizations

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1 de 7 Migrando	Comité Internacional de la Cruz Roja Delegación Para México y América Central
ACNUR/UNHCR	
Agenda Migrante	Consejo Binacional por la Diversidad Sexual Discriminación e Igualdad de los Derechos Humanos LGBTTI A.C
Al Otro Lado	
Albergue "La Sagrada Familia" A.C.	Cruz Roja Guatemalteca Delegación Petén
Albergue Oasis De Paz Del Espíritu Santo Amparito A.C.	Cruz Roja Mexicana Coahuila de Migración y Políticas Públicas
Albergue Para Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes Solicitantes de Asilo No Acompañados o Separados Colibrí	Dignidad y Justicia en el Camino A.C.
Albergue Temporal Para Menores Migrantes DIF CHIAPAS	Dream in Mexico
Albergue Tochan - Nuestra Casa	Dreamers Moms USA Tijuana A.C
Alianza Américas	El Buen Samaritano de la IMMAR
Asylum Access México	El Colegio de México: Centro de Estudios Demográficos, Urbanos y Ambientales
CAFEMI	Frontera con Justicia A.C.
Casa De Oración Del Migrante A.C.	Fundación Binacional Pasos de Fe y Esperanza A.C
Casa del Migrante San Carlos Borromeo	Fundación Casa Alianza México
Casa Fuente de Apoyo a Mujeres Niñas y Niños Víctimas de Violencia A.C.	Hospital Psiquiátrico Fray Bernardino Álvarez
Catholic Relief Services	Hospitalidad y Solidaridad, A.C.
Centro de Assunta	IMUMI
Centro de Derechos del Migrante	Iniciativas Para el Desarrollo Humano A.C.
Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías De Córdova A.C.	Institución Normativa de los Indigentes A.C. "CASA INDI"
Clínica Especializada Condesa	Instituto de Servicios de Salud Pública del Estado de Baja California
Coalición México por los Derechos de las Personas con Discapacidad	Instituto Federal de Defensoría Pública
Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos	Instituto Tamaulipeco para los Migrantes
	Integración Social Verter A.C.
	Justice in Motion

KIND

Médecins Sans Frontières

Misioneros Claretianos Centroamérica

Moviendo el Mundo

Movimiento Juventud 2000, Secc. Tijuana, A.C.

Oasis Providencial A.C. - Albergue Decanal  
Guadalupano

Otros Dreams en Acción

Programa Casa Refugiados A.C.

Proyecto Salesiano Tijuana A.C.- Desayunador  
Salesiano Padre Chava

Refugee Health Alliance

Save the Children

Scalabrinianas: Misión Con Migrantes y  
Refugiados

Secretaria de las Mujeres de la CDMX

Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes - México

Servicio Jesuita a Refugiados

Servicios De Salud De Coahuila De Zaragoza

Sin Fronteras IAP

Student Immigrant Movement

The Mexican Migration Field Research Program  
(UCSD)

Todo Por Ellos A.C.

Una Mano Amiga

Una Mano Amiga en la Lucha Contra el Sida  
A.C.

Uno de Siete Migrando A.C.

URP

Vital

Voces de Mujeres en Acción, A.C. | Red  
Necesito Abortar

Voces Mesoamericanas

## Appendix G: Characteristics of Project Participants

**Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics, Service Provider Survey, February-March 2021**

Key Variables	Service Providers (N=55)	
	N	Frequency (%)
<b>Primary Region of Work</b>		
Southern Mexico and NTCA Countries	23	42%
Northern Mexico and U.S. Border	16	29%
Central Mexico	13	24%
Multiple	3	5%
<b>Estimated Maximum Service Capacity</b>		
0-50 people per month	16	29%
51-100 people per month	4	7%
101-300 people per month	14	25%
301-500 people per month	8	15%
>500 people per month	8	15%
Unknown (no response)	5	9%
<b>Type of Organization</b>		
Local NGO	18	33%
Government	11	20%
Religious Institution	7	13%
International NGO	6	11%
Other	6	11%
International Organization	5	9%
Health Facility	2	3%
<b>Area of Work<sup>1</sup></b>		
Migration Counseling	32	58%
Legal Services	32	58%
Food	29	53%
Medical Services	29	53%
Mental Health and Psychosocial Support	29	53%
Violence Response	28	51%
Clothing	27	49%
Education About Rights	27	49%
Shelter	26	47%
Sexual Violence Response	26	47%
Protection	25	45%
Showers	24	44%
Violence Prevention	18	33%
Job Placement	16	29%
Other	10	18%
<b>Target Population<sup>1</sup></b>		
No specific target population	29	53%
Refugees and asylum seekers	19	35%
Women with children	12	22%
Women	11	20%
People traveling undocumented	10	18%
Unaccompanied minors	10	18%
Families	9	16%
LGBTIQ	9	16%
People traveling from Central America	8	15%

Internally displaced people (IDPs)	7	13%
Survivors of violence	7	13%
Elderly people (>65 years old)	6	11%
Deportees	6	11%
Single men	5	9%
Indigenous people	4	7%
People with disabilities	4	7%
Other target population	3	5%

<sup>1</sup>Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive and respondents were permitted to select more than one response option.

**Table 2. Descriptive Characteristics, Qualitative Interviewees, February-March 2021**

Key Variables	Interviewees (N=35)	
	N	Frequency (%)
<b>Interview modality</b>		
Live interview (phone or video)	28	80%
Written interview (web form)	7	20%
<b>Primary Region of Work</b>		
Northern Mexico and U.S. Border	12	34%
Central Mexico	9	26%
Multiple	7	20%
United States	4	11%
Southern Mexico and NTCA Countries	3	9%
<b>Estimated Maximum Service Capacity</b>		
0-50 people per month	5	14%
51-100 people per month	3	9%
101-500 people per month	4	11.5%
>500 people per month	5	14%
Unknown or not applicable	18	51.5%
<b>Type of Organization</b>		
Local NGO	21	60%
International NGO	6	17%
Research or Advocacy Organization	5	14%
Religious Institution	3	9%
Government	0	-
International Organization	0	-
<b>Area of Work<sup>1</sup></b>		
Legal Services	18	51%
Migration Counseling	16	46%
Mental Health and Psychosocial Support	13	37%
Violence Prevention	11	31%
Food	10	29%
Medical Services	10	29%
Violence Response	10	29%
Shelter	10	29%
Clothing	7	20%
Showers	7	20%
Job Placement	6	17%
Education About Rights	4	11%
Sexual Violence Response	2	6%

Protection	1	3%
Other	12	34%
<b>Target Population<sup>1</sup></b>		
No specific target population	16	46%
Women	9	26%
Women with children	8	23%
Families	8	23%
Single men	8	23%
Unaccompanied minors	7	20%
LGBTIQ	7	20%
Elderly people (>65 years old)	4	11%
Deportees	3	9%
Other target population	3	9%
Refugees and asylum seekers	1	3%
People traveling undocumented	0	-
People traveling from Central America	0	-
Internally displaced people (IDPs)	0	-
Survivors of violence	0	-
Indigenous people	0	-
People with disabilities	0	-

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<sup>1</sup>Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive and respondents were permitted to select more than one response option.