

PEOPLE MOVEMENT IN MEXICO

How the COVID-19 crisis is interfacing with migration and displacement

Thematic report – August 2020

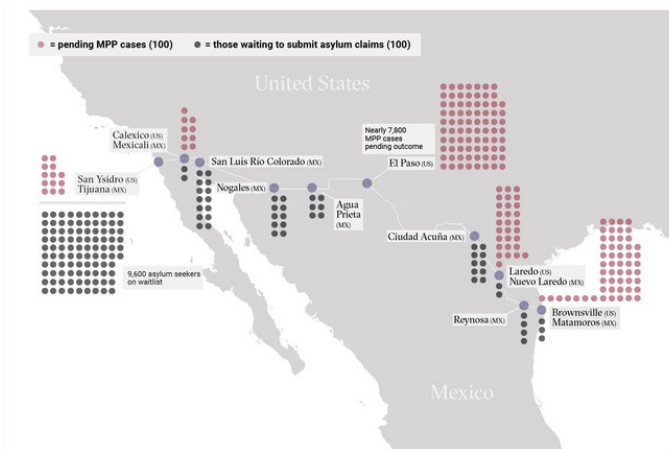
At the end of August, the number of recorded COVID-19 deaths in Mexico reached 60,000, making it the country with the third highest death toll in the world, after the United States and Brazil. Although the transmission rate appears slower than at the start of the month, the spread of the virus is not under control and an extremely low testing rate means it remains impossible to understand the full extent of it. The COVID-19 epidemic in Mexico is interacting with other crisis dynamics in the country. Most notably, the pandemic has provided the Trump administration with an opportunity to further its agenda to block immigration into the United States leaving thousands of migrants on the Mexican side of the border in limbo with their right to access asylum withheld indefinitely.

Within Mexico, the pandemic has provided criminal groups with an opportunity to intensify activities and exert greater influence over the local population, while the state is distracted by its efforts to manage the escalating health crisis.

If Mexico's security situation continues to deteriorate over the coming months, and access to asylum in the USA remains blocked, migrants that remain in Mexico will face growing protection concerns including increased vulnerability to trafficking, kidnapping and physical and sexual abuse. This is in addition to rising health needs as COVID-19 continues to spread. This convergence of factors places migrants in an increasingly vulnerable situation.

Waiting at the US-Mexico border: A snapshot

Numbers of asylum seekers waiting at key border crossings to submit applications or for hearings to be scheduled



Source: TNH

COVID-19 and migration

In attempt to contain the spread of COVID-19 a range of containment measures have been imposed in countries across the world. Although necessary to manage the virus, these measures have affected millions of livelihoods, brought economies to the brink of collapse and significantly limited the movement of goods and people, nationally and internationally. Migrant populations are among the most vulnerable to the impact of the pandemic.

- 1 They are vulnerable to the spread of the virus due to mostly living in crowded shelter conditions, including camps or informal settlements, where maintaining social distancing and hygiene and sanitation standards is impossible and where health care is largely inaccessible.
- 2 Migrant populations often rely on informal labour which has faced significant disruption, and they are not eligible for social protection schemes to balance their loss of livelihood.
- 3 Without protocols in place for their protection, migrants, particularly asylum seekers, who have fled situations of violence, are especially impacted by border closures. Prior to the pandemic the global rhetoric around migration has already been strongly shaped by perceived links between security and migration. The pandemic risks strengthening that rhetoric further, adding the link between migration and a perceived risk to public health. This will have a longer term impact on socio-economic inclusion and social cohesion (WEF, 22/05/2020; TNH, 17/04/2020; Open Democracy, 26/05/2020).

About this report

Prior to the pandemic, migrants in Mexico were already facing a dire humanitarian situation, particularly in northern towns as people continued to arrive at the US border despite tight immigration policy delaying asylum proceedings. As Mexico now grapples with one of the world's worst outbreaks of COVID-19, thousands of migrants face increased vulnerability. **This report focuses on Mexico because of the severity of the current COVID-19 outbreak as well as the way in which the epidemic is interacting with other crisis dynamics in the country.**

The report provides an overview how the spread of COVID-19 has led to a deteriorating situation for migrants in Mexico. It primarily focuses on how the pandemic has provided an opportunity for US immigration policy to become even more stringent, effectively blocking asylum rights indefinitely. Consequently, humanitarian needs will worsen as more people are caught in limbo, whilst also being left with even less support than was available prior to the pandemic, due to reduced capacity of local volunteers and NGOs.

The report highlights key factors, in addition to the spread of COVID-19, that risk further aggravating the situation for migrant communities. Most notably that there has been a deterioration in the security situation. Alongside managing the epidemic, the state has less capacity to manage criminality therefore local gangs and organised criminal networks have increased activity. As well as this trigger additional protection concerns for migrant communities who are often subject to abuse by criminal gangs or targeted by trafficking networks, there is also the risk that this will lead to an internal displacement situation, as more Mexicans are pushed to seek safety.

The report also provides an overview of the many information gaps that exist and need to be better understood in order to fully comprehend how migrant communities have been impacted by both the primary and secondary impact of the pandemic.

Limitations

The report is based on a secondary data review, within which are many information gaps. Understanding the extent of needs amongst migrant communities in Mexico is complex, largely because the whereabouts of many migrants is not clear. The reported numbers of migrants living in different shelter conditions vary. It is also likely that many migrants in Mexico are unaccounted for and therefore understanding the extent of humanitarian need is not possible.

Situation overview

- The COVID-19 epidemic in both Mexico and the US continues to spread provide a cover for strict US border policies that block asylum indefinitely.
- Tens of thousands of migrants have been deported from the US, mostly back to Mexico as well as other Central American countries since March, including unaccompanied minors, without access to any form of assistance.
- As the Mexican government is absorbed by its efforts to manage the health crisis, opportunistic cartels advance their own social and political influence. Migrants are particularly vulnerable to being targeted by criminal groups including trafficking networks.
- Containment measures in Mexico continue to limit access of humanitarians to provide assistance, including legal support to asylum seekers.

COVID-19 in Mexico

The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Mexico on 28 February and the first death on 19 March. As of 25 August, there are **over 560,000 confirmed cases in Mexico and over 60,480 confirmed deaths** (WHO, 25/08/2020). With only an estimated **three tests per 100,000 people** Mexico has one of the lowest testing rates in the world; therefore, the reported number of cases and fatalities is likely to vastly underrepresent the real situation. Testing is even limited in hospitals and among patients and medical staff displaying symptoms, and there is no contact tracing system in place. **Despite the extremely low testing rate, half of all tests in Mexico are coming back positive.** This is the highest positivity rate in the world, and an alarming indication of the number of positive cases that are going untested (The Guardian, 24/07/2020; Bloomberg, 01/07/2020).

The government implemented a series of restrictions at the end of March, including school closures and the closure of bars, restaurants, and businesses considered non-essential as well as factories. The country was placed under lockdown, movement was limited, and social distancing encouraged, although the enforcement of the rules was somewhat lax in comparison to other countries in the region. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Mexico's President, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has continued to repeatedly downplay the pandemic and emphasize the need for the economy to stay open. Despite a rapidly rising caseload, the government reopened sectors of the economy in June and eased social distancing guidelines. This led to acceleration of virus spread (France 24, 23/07/2020; The Guardian, 16/07/2020; The Guardian, 24/07/2020).

Overview of migration in Mexico prior to COVID-19

Mexico is a transit country for those trying to reach the US and a destination for migrants from Central America, most of whom are fleeing situations of violence or live in unsustainable conditions due to drought and food insecurity. Over 80% of all migrants that transit through or seek asylum in Mexico are from the 'Northern Triangle' of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador). According to the Mexican government around 15% of migrants detained in Mexico in 2019 were from outside Latin America, including Haiti, Sri Lanka, and some African countries (NPR, 20/07/2020; Migration Policy, 15/08/2019).

US and Mexican immigration policy prior to COVID-19

In 2018 and 2019 there was a surge in migrant arrivals to the US due to record levels of violence in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, as well as worsening drought and food insecurity. This prompted the Trump administration to implement a series of interlocking policies aimed at deterring migration flows. The string of policies reduced asylum eligibility and provided authorities with increased power to reject the majority of asylum seekers at the border prior to them submitting an asylum claim. A stricter cap was placed on the number of claims that can be processed daily through a policy known as 'metering', leading to delays of up to nine months. In January 2019 the Trump administration also enacted the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), commonly known as the 'Remain in Mexico' policy. This allows the return of asylum seekers from Spanish speaking countries (and later Brazil) to Mexico while they await their court hearings in the US. Despite tight limits on the number of asylum claims processed, and the forced return of people back to Mexico, migrants continued to travel towards the US border. This led to a build-up of thousands of people in Mexico's northern towns where migrant shelters reached capacity. When the US suspended asylum processes altogether in March 2020 under the guise of COVID protection measures there were already around 14,500 people on informal metering lists in 11 towns in northern Mexico, and 18,000 people who had been sent back to Mexico under MPP still awaiting their hearing (TNH, 29/06/2020; Open Democracy, 26/05/2020; Migration Policy Institute, 20/02/2020; TNH, 29/06/2020; Migration Policy, 15/08/2019).

Adding to the situation, the US government threatened to impose tariffs on Mexican goods unless Mexico increased efforts to stem the flow of migrants into the US. Consequently, the Mexican government increased securitization of the southern border with Guatemala. As a result, more migrants were apprehended leading to an increase in deportations as well as detention centers operating beyond capacity. Furthermore, rather than continue north, the number of migrants seeking asylum in Mexico doubled from 2018 to 2019, pushing Mexico's asylum system to its limits. As of October 2019 a backlog of 64,000 people were waiting for their asylum claims to be processed in Mexico (Asylum

Access, 08/01/2020). This led to a steep rise in the number of people staying in migrant shelters in the south awaiting their claims to be processed. By the end of 2019, stringent US immigration policy had led to a bottleneck along both of Mexico's borders (WOLA, 17/12/2019; Al Jazeera, 10/07/2020)

Changes in migration dynamics since the onset of COVID-19

New US immigration policy leading to deteriorating humanitarian situation on the northern border

Asylum seekers stuck at the US-Mexico border are now caught between a worsening epidemic inside Mexico, and a series of US policies that block their right to asylum. In addition to existing highly restrictive immigration policies in place since 2018, the Trump administration imposed new policies in March 2020 that attempt to block legal and illegal migration into the US, with the stated aim of limiting the spread of COVID-19. New policy stipulates that asylum seekers, or anyone arriving into the US without authorisation, can be expelled immediately without legal process, including unaccompanied minors (El Paso Times, 08/07/2020; TNH, 22/06/2020; New York Times, 20/05/2020; American Immigration Council, 27/05/2020).

Since the new policies were implemented, over 40,000 migrants have been expelled from the US, including people who have been in US detention centres for some months, and others who have only been on US soil for a matter of hours. There is no data available on the individuals expelled or where they have been expelled to. Some people have been sent directly back to their country of origin via plane, while the majority were sent back to Mexico by plane to Mexico City, or by bus and left just south of the US border, often in remote areas, without any access to shelter or any other form of support (TNH, 29/06/2020).

In April, asylum officers in the US reported that they would usually receive hundreds of cases referred to them each day, but after the new policy they reported receiving less than 10 per day. This is an indication of how quickly the policy took effect and the rate at which new arrivals may have been turned away at the border (Los Angeles Times, 09/04/2020).

Although the number of people attempting to cross from Mexico into the US is significantly lower than the same time last year, **neither the pandemic nor the new immigration policies have halted migration flows.** In June US authorities detained around 30,000 people who had crossed the border that month, an increase of 40% from May. The demographic is primarily single adults from Mexico, rather than families and unaccompanied children from Central America as it was in 2019 (Reuters, 09/07/2020; Texas Public Radio, 31/07/2020; El Pais, 10/07/2020).

As people continue to arrive in Mexico's northern towns while asylum procedures are delayed indefinitely and the US continues to expel asylum seekers back to Mexico, humanitarian needs along the northern border will continue to grow (El Pais, 10/07/2020).

Unclear situation on the southern border

In April and May there were reports that Mexican authorities were transporting hundreds of migrants by bus back to the southern border with Guatemala. This is a continuation of a scheme that began in 2019 with the stated aim of enabling migrants to relocate away from northern towns, which are considered particularly insecure due to the high presence of criminal groups, whilst awaiting a court hearing. There is an unspoken expectation that they will then make their way home to Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador; however, these countries borders remain closed. Guatemala made an exception by allowing Guatemalans to return; however, people of other nationalities were seemingly left stranded and without support. There are anecdotal reports of some people seen walking and crossing into Guatemala via unofficial border points but the whereabouts of most are largely unknown. It is not clear to what extent people continue to be transported by bus to the southern states, nor whether they have access to any support, including legal support (Expansion Politica, 13/05/2020; ACAPS Key Informant interview with operational actors, 17/07/2020).

Release of migrants from Mexico's detention centres

In April a group of local organisations advocating for the rights of migrants filled a lawsuit arguing that the government must provide more support to migrant populations during the pandemic. The judge ruled that migrants in Mexico's 65 detention centres be released and granted residency rights that provide them with access to essential services. This applied to around 3,650 people. The judge also ruled that migrants remaining inside official immigration and detention centres be granted rights to access essential services. However, even if access to services has been legally approved, concerns remain that migrants will choose not to seek support out of fear of being deported. Of those released from detention centres, some people were assisted by UNHCR in finding rented accommodation, but the whereabouts of all are not clear. It is expected that many are now living in makeshift shelters on the streets, potentially no less vulnerable than when they were inside the centres (Al Jazeera, 19/04/2020; UNHCR, 28/04/2020; France 24, 05/05/2020; The Intercept, 11/05/2020).

Humanitarian impact

Prior to the onset of COVID-19 migrants and asylum seekers in Mexico were already extremely vulnerable. Migrants live in crowded shelters, makeshift settlements, or in some cases informally rent crowded accommodation in towns and cities. Access to healthcare is limited, and hygiene and sanitation facilities are very inadequate. There is no access to education and although some migrants pursue informal labour, livelihood opportunities are scarce, particularly with the onset of the pandemic disrupting informal labour. Migrants are commonly subject to violence, rape, intimidation, extortion, and robbery by organised criminal gangs that operate across Mexico, particularly in the border states. The onset of the pandemic has exacerbated an already highly precarious situation for migrant populations (TNH, 29/06/2020).

Living conditions and essential services

Shelter conditions: Most migrants in Mexico live in NGO managed migrant shelters, informal makeshift settlements, and in some cases, they may be transferred by humanitarian agencies to rented accommodation. Accurate data on the numbers of people living in different shelter conditions is unavailable and information often contradictory.

It is unknown how many migrants currently stranded at either the northern or southern border. In April it was estimated that there were 27,000 Hondurans alone, left to wait along the northern border. It is not clear in what conditions everyone is living. Prior to the pandemic it was estimated there were over 15,000 migrants in 11 towns along the northern border. This includes around 11,000 people staying in migrant shelters, which were operating at above 50% capacity, and a further 4,000 people in makeshift settlements. With the onset of the pandemic, shelters stopped receiving new arrivals in attempt to limit the spread of the virus¹. Multiple reports indicate that living spaces remain overcrowded and access to adequate hygiene and sanitation facilities is limited. This raises the risk of the rapid spread of COVID-19 as well as other illnesses (Open Democracy, 26/05/2020; TNH, 22/06/2020).

Further reports indicate that the numbers of people living in settlements and migrant shelters have decreased in recent months. For example, prior to the pandemic the largest makeshift settlement was in Matamoros, with an estimated 2,500 people. **A recent survey indicates the migrant population in the camps in Matamoros has reduced by around 50%.** Similarly, the number of people inside migrant shelters has also decreased. While at the

¹ As of early July, some shelters in the north have been accepting some new arrivals, but only those who have been issued a referral and have been through a health check (UNHCR, 03/07/2020)

start of the pandemic there were reportedly around 11,000 migrants in shelters in the north, a UNHCR report from the beginning of July stated that only 4,080 people remained in all 90 shelters in the north (UNHCR, 03/07/2020; Expansion Política, 13/05/2020; The Brownsville Herald, 29/07/2020).

This suggests that migrants may be giving up on their asylum attempts and moving elsewhere within Mexico. This could be due to fear of contracting COVID-19 in such crowded living spaces, as well as the prospect of asylum having been indefinitely postponed. Others may have chosen to leave the shelters to pursue informal livelihood activities, given that containment measures prohibit re-entry to the shelters, effectively blocking them from accessing work. It is not clear where people have gone or in what conditions they are living. As more people chose to give up on their asylum claim and leave shelters along the border, as the reported figures suggest, there are concerns that more and more people will become undocumented, further limiting their access to essential services (Open Democracy, 26/05/2020; TNH, 22/06/2020; Documented. 01/06/2020).

Legal support: Prior to the pandemic it was very difficult for asylum seekers to access legal support in Mexico because the organisations providing this support were stretched well beyond capacity. The few legal groups that normally provide guidance to migrants are even less available as containment measures have forced them to reduce working hours (El Paso, 08/07/2020).

Access to food and essential goods: Prior to the onset of the pandemic shelters were already facing shortages of food and essential medicines. Movement restrictions and supply disruptions will make sustained supply of essential goods even more challenging (TNH, 22/06/2020).

Education: Migrants in Mexico are allowed to attend school but most chose not to due to fears of being kidnapped. Currently school is not an option as all schools remain closed across Mexico in light of COVID-19. In some of the camps along the northern border NGOs provide limited education services. It is not clear to what extent these have been able to continue amid the pandemic (Vox, 20/12/2019).

Access to information: It is not clear whether migrants have access to information about changes in policy or what will happen to them should they attempt to enter US territory. Anecdotal reporting suggests information and communication is lacking. For example, there are reports of unaccompanied children being returned home, without their families first being notified back in their country of origin, which is leading to confusion and distress.

With regard to information about COVID-19, including public health messaging on how to avoid contracting or spreading the virus, information is only available in Spanish. Therefore, non-Spanish speaking migrants (for example people from Sri Lanka or Haiti)

are particularly vulnerable as vital information about COVID-19 is not translated into other languages, such as French or English (TNH, 22/06/2020).

Protection

There are multiple reports in recent years of migrants being subject to physical abuse, rape, kidnapping, robbery, extortion and trafficking in Mexico. Local actors and gangs are typically less organised and target migrants for robbery, extortion and assault. Larger, organised groups seeking to expand their network are more likely to engage in kidnapping of migrants for profit, or to force migrants to pay taxes along certain routes. These groups are also prey on migrants for trafficking purposes, the country's third largest illicit activity after guns and drugs (The Guardian, 23/03/2020; Human Rights Watch, Human Rights First, accessed 09/07/2020; Insight Crime, 17/07/2020; Reuters, 29/04/2020).

Migrants across Mexico are vulnerable to these risks, although the northern border areas are particularly dangerous due to the high presence of armed groups and the fact that they await migrants being returned from the US. In late-February 2020 Human Rights First compiled more than a thousand publicly reported rapes, murders, kidnappings or other violent crimes against migrants that had been returned to Mexico to await their court dates. Criminal gangs, as well as police, were often the perpetrators (The Guardian, 23/03/2020; Human Rights Watch, Human Rights First, accessed 09/07/2020).

As new policies increase the rate of people being forcibly returned from the US, more people will find themselves caught in limbo. This is occurring alongside increasing rates of gang violence inside Mexico. Consequently, **there is a growing risk that more and more migrants will fall into the hands of criminal groups and be subject to violence over the coming weeks and months.** New arrivals to the northern towns are mostly not permitted entry to shelters, and people are left to sleep in tents or makeshift shelters where they are particularly vulnerable to drug cartels and gangs. Previously rules stipulated migrants were only allowed to be returned to Mexico during certain daylight hours to minimise risk. Since the new policies were implemented, people are being returned at all hours of the night, increasing the risk of exposure to criminal groups (El Paso, 08/07/2020; TNH, 22/06/2020). Furthermore, **organised criminal groups will likely use the opportunity to create new smuggling and trafficking routes amid border closures**, exposing migrants to higher risk. Containment measures have led to a reduction in usual data collection activities that gather information on attacks against asylum seekers. Despite reduced data collection, the number of recorded attacks against asylum seekers has still continued to rise since the start of 2020 (Human Rights First, 13/05/2020; Contra Linea, 06/07/2020; Amnesty International, accessed 22/07/2020).

Vulnerability

There has been a notable shift in the demographic profile of asylum seekers arriving at the northern border since the onset of the pandemic. 80% of migrants are now adult males travelling alone, rather than families. Vulnerable individuals also continue to arrive and are turned away (El Pais, 10/07/2020).

Unaccompanied children: Although the rate of arrival is slower than usual, unaccompanied children continue to arrive at the US-Mexico border and hundreds have been turned away, in some cases without their families being notified. There are no official figures from the US, but countries of origin have reported an increase in children sent back from the US. For example Guatemala reports receiving 100 unaccompanied minors in the first week of April which is as many as it took throughout all of March (El Paso, 08/07/2020; New York Times, 20/05/2020; Los Angeles Times, 09/04/2020). Between March and May over 1,000 unaccompanied minors are estimated to have been expelled from the US under the new law. Some unaccompanied minors already held in US detention centres were also deported back to their country of origin (Human Rights Watch, 20/05/2020).

Pregnant women: Previously, exceptions were made for asylum seekers who are considered more vulnerable. In more recent weeks there have been reports of vulnerable people including pregnant women being turned away at the border (El Paso, 08/07/2020).

Health

Migrants are being deported from the US without any health screening or testing for COVID-19. Once back in Mexico some migrants have shown symptoms of the virus and there are fears that the rapid deportation is increasing the spread of COVID-19 amongst migrant communities. Overcrowded living spaces and poor hygiene and sanitation facilities make conditions ripe for an outbreak. Migrants often have untreated chronic health conditions. These factors increase the risk of susceptibility to a severe form of COVID-19 (Al Jazeera, 10/07/2020).

It is not known how many migrants have contracted COVID-19. This is in part due to the fact that there is limited testing capacity, and the full extent of the virus spread across Mexico is far from clear. The full impact among migrant communities, may be even less clear as most migrants do not attempt to access healthcare out of fear of being deported. Cases of COVID-19 have already been confirmed in multiple communities and settlements hosting migrants. In the border city of Juárez, one of the largest hubs for asylum seekers, over 2,000 cases and 420 deaths have been reported (Al Jazeera, 30/06/2020; BMJ, 09/07/2020).

The indefinite block on access to the US asylum system is exacerbating stress, anxiety and other psychosocial needs amongst migrant communities which has always been

one of the most prominent issues for migrants from the Northern Triangle due to many having faced high levels of violence and abuse. The fear, uncertainty and misinformation that surround asylum proceedings as well as COVID-19 is also having a significant impact on mental health (BMJ, 09/07/2020; TNH, 22/06/2020).

Disruption to regular provision of migrant support

Local Mexican NGOs and volunteer groups that previously provided humanitarian support to migrants along the border areas have been forced to significantly reduce their working hours in the camps. This is in part due to increased movement restrictions as a result of containment measures. Resources previously available for NGOs to work in migrant camps may have been reallocated to respond to the pandemic in home communities. Services were often provided by American volunteers who would cross the border, but this is currently impossible due to the border closure. The limited essential services that were provided to migrants by the Mexican government have been halted (BMJ, 09/07/2020; Vox, 13/05/2020; Angelus, 06/07/2020).

Aggravating factors

Deteriorating security situation in Mexico

Since 2018 criminal gang violence has risen due to increased fragmentation of cartels and competition over resources and drug infrastructure. 2019 was Mexico's most violent year in recent history with more than 35,000 homicides according to official statistics (Reuters, 21/01/2020). The trend of increased violence visible before the pandemic has intensified. In the first four months of 2020, 11,535 people were murdered, which represents an all-time high (BBC, 22/06/2020; Al Jazeera, 01/07/2020; Reuters, 18/06/2020).

The onset of the pandemic has increased criminal gang violence across Mexico. Global containment measures have reduced international trade routes, and limited market functionality. This has significantly disrupted supply and demand within the narcotics trade, leaving cartels to fight over a smaller piece of the pie, leading to a rise in violence. At the same time, cartels and other criminal groups are seemingly using this moment as an opportunity to expand their territorial control while the state is distracted from law enforcement by its efforts to manage the pandemic. There are reports of cartels positioning themselves as the protectors of communities and enhancing their social and political influence by providing aid packages to those suffering hardship due to COVID-19 containment measures and disruption, while the state struggles to meet all community needs. Police and armed forces have been deployed to enforce containment measures and guard medical facilities, and security barracks have been turned into COVID-19 treatment centres, leaving more limited capacity to manage criminality and associated violence. Police and security officials falling sick is further depleting capacity

(Reuters, 18/06/2020; Foreign Policy, 08/05/2020; Vice, 25/03/2020; New York Times, 07/07/2020; 02/07/2020).

The extent to which criminal violence impacts civilian life and results in what could be classified as “humanitarian need” is not clear, although there are reports that state homes, businesses, and small shops are being targeted if people are unable to pay a tax to a criminal group with influence over their territory. It is not clear if this results in threats, extortion, or physical violence.

One of the main outcomes of criminal violence in Mexico is displacement. In addition to the international dimensions of migration through Mexico, although generally under reported, the country is experiencing its own internal displacement crisis. IDMC reports that as of end of 2019, over 345,000 people were internally displaced as a result of violence and conflict. Previous trends show that as rates of criminal violence increase in Mexico, there is a rise in the number of Mexicans who apply for asylum in the US and elsewhere. Amid the current escalation of violence in Mexico the same trend is likely to continue. However, US immigration policy will block this from happening. Instead, people will remain unable to leave Mexico, and will be subject to increased danger (CSIS, 07/06/2020).

Increased fragmentation of Mexico’s criminal gangs

Prior to the pandemic the Mexican state was facing difficulties in effectively dealing with the complex web of criminal groups operating in the country. In the early 2000s identifying the dominant groups was easier; however, government security policies over recent years attempting to tackle organised crime have led to **increased fragmentation of groups, which increases the risk of violence and makes tracking the source of activity more challenging**. Research undertaken by ICG revealed that between 2009 and 2019 there were over 400 active criminal groups, with only half of them ever reported on in El Universal, one of Mexico’s largest newspapers. This provides an indication of how little is understood about criminal groups’ operations in Mexico. Understanding the nature of the fragmentation and how these groups’ activities link to violence, and to one another, is essential in order to know how to manage it (ICG, 08/05/2020; DW, 24/04/2020).

Heavy rains and potential flooding

Heavy rains, winds and hurricanes are an ongoing risk across parts of the country between June and November. Migrants are often the most vulnerable not just because the camps at the border offer insufficient protection from the elements, but also because their overall vulnerability means they are likely to be residing in makeshift settlements and buildings which don’t give adequate protection and because they will be the least likely to approach official shelters due to fears and concerns about deportation.

In late July heavy rain and winds as a result of Hurricane Hanna (later downgraded to a tropical storm) led to flooding in Matamoros migrant camp on the US-Mexico border, currently home to over 1,000 people. Mexico’s National Institute for Migration was encouraging migrants to evacuate the camp and move to shelter spaces that were being provided in local buildings, including a church. While some people did move to higher ground, they were reportedly reluctant to leave the camps due to distrust of the authorities and concerns that the evacuation plan might be a guise to encourage them to return home. Should heavy rain and winds continue over the coming days, living conditions will further deteriorate and provide even less of a defense against the spread of COVID-19 (The Herald, 29/07/2020; Texas Public Radio, 26/07/2020; BBC, 27/07/2020; Al Jazeera, 03/08/2020).

Economic damage

Mexico’s economy was in decline prior to the pandemic, with private and public investment at record lows. The disruption caused by COVID-19 means **over 12 million Mexicans have been forced to stop their livelihood activities, and the government has offered little social protection**. Over half of Mexico’s population rely on informal labour and are therefore highly vulnerable to economic shocks. According to the IMF, the Mexican government’s economic response has been especially frugal and notably different to other government responses in the region (CFR, 23/07/2020; CSIS, 07/06/2020).

By the end of 2020 Mexico’s economy is expected to decline by more than 10% and unemployment will continue to rise. As the economic situation, as well as the security situation inside Mexico deteriorate over the coming months, there may be an increase in the number of Mexicans who want to leave the country and an increased flow of Mexicans towards the northern border. So long as borders remain closed, and asylum processes stalled, more people will be left to wait and endure increasingly difficult living conditions (CFR, 23/07/2020; CSIS, 07/06/2020).

Information gaps

Expulsions and deportations

- Data on the number of people returned from the US is not publicly available nor is it possible to know at what rate people are being returned. It is also not clear how many people are directly turned back at the border without having made it on to US territory.
- Of the migrants deported or expelled from US territory since the new policies were implemented, it is not clear how many were new arrivals into the country during this timeframe, and how many were already inside US detention centres awaiting a court date.
- It is not clear how many people intercepted at the border are pushed overland back to Mexico or put on board planes and returned to their country of origin.
- There is no breakdown of age, gender or other characteristics of those expelled from the US.
- Following the implementation of new policy that allows for the expulsion of migrants back to Mexico from the US, a number of migrants have then been transported by bus to the southern border. It is not known how many people have been transported to the south, nor where they shelter once they arrive. Some people may have made their way back to their country of origin despite border closures though there is no data available to confirm this or to assist in identifying numbers of people at risk in the different countries.
- Overall it is challenging to quantify the potential number of people in need of different types of support because of a lack of data at various points of the migration pathway.

Living conditions

- It is not clear how many migrants are living in informal settlements or makeshift tents in the towns along the northern or southern border.
- There are reports that state migrant shelters are overcrowded and above capacity. Although UNHCR reports that in the 90 shelters along the northern border there are 4,080 people, which is less than half the amount reported prior to the pandemic. Why this information differs remains unclear.

Protection

- Internal displacement in Mexico is widely underreported. It is not clear to what extent criminal violence leads to internal displacement and whether displacement is temporary or permanent.
- There is a lack of concrete data to provide any clear understanding of this extent of trafficking networks operational in Mexico (Reuters, 09/07/2020).
- Given that many criminal groups operate on such a local level, a lot of their activities and influence do not get picked up by media outlets and therefore the impact that these groups have on civilians' lives goes by largely unknown – the fact that Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists compounds and complicates this.

Health

- It is not clear to what extent migrant communities have been hit by the spread of COVID-19. It is likely that many cases will go untested and therefore underreported partly because people may avoid seeking testing health care out of fear of being identified and deported.