

Anticipated impact of new US immigration policies on people on the move

SUMMARY AND BACKGROUND: IMMIGRATION-RELATED EXECUTIVE ORDERS

In January 2025, US President Donald Trump issued ten executive orders (EOs – defined in the Terminology section below) on US immigration policy. Collectively, these EOs are expected to increase humanitarian needs for people on the move in Mexico. The main aims and effects of these EOs are outlined below.

- **Effectively banning people from requesting asylum on arrival at the US-Mexico border** (EO 14159) from 21 January 2025 (WOLA 24/01/2025; AIC 22/01/2025; Federal Register 20/01/2025). This EO decrees that anyone who crosses the southern border without documentation will be unable to invoke provisions of the Immigration and Nationality Act, including the right to claim asylum. This may also apply to other humanitarian protections against deportation covered by the act, including for unaccompanied children (AIC 22/01/2025; Govt. of US 20/01/2025 a; NPR 23/01/2025).
- **Preventing the use of the Customs and Border Protection application (CBP One app)** (EO 14165), the sole pathway for people to seek asylum at the US-Mexico border. The app allowed people to enter a lottery system for scheduled appointments at specific border crossings. The relevant EO also cancelled around 30,000 scheduled appointments (WOLA 24/01/2025; MSF 22/01/2025; AIC 02/06/2023; Immigration Policy Tracking Project 20/01/2025).
- **Restarting the 'Remain in Mexico' programme** (EO 14165), previously in effect from 2019–2022, which requires non-Mexican asylum seekers to reside in Mexico while awaiting US immigration hearings (WOLA 24/01/2025; MSF 21/01/2025; Immigration Policy Tracking Project 20/01/2025). The President of Mexico has stated that the Mexican Government will receive any asylum seekers deported under 'Remain in Mexico' in a humanitarian manner (Govt. of Mexico 21/01/2025). As people will no longer be able to request asylum at the southern border (according to EO 14159), it is unclear how this order will be implemented (AIC 22/01/2025; WOLA 24/01/2025).
- **Increasing deportations from the US** (EO 14159), including by expanding 'expedited removal', which permits deportation with no court proceedings for people who entered the US in an irregular manner and have been present for less than two years (AIC 22/01/2025). EO 14159 also provides for the creation of the Homeland Security Task Force to oversee deportations across the US (WOLA 24/01/2025; Govt. of. US 20/01/2025 b).

- **Rescinding several immigration-related policies adopted by the former US administration**, including the termination of the Cuban, Haitian, Nicaraguan, and Venezuelan parole programme (EO 14165), which allowed 30,000 people from these countries to enter and remain in the US for two years. This policy relieved some pressure at the US-Mexico border by providing an alternative pathway to enter the US. People already in the US under this programme may be subject to expedited removal (WOLA 24/01/2025 and 07/02/2025; AIC 22/01/2025; MPI 23/01/2025). The Trump administration also rescinded EOs passed by former President Joe Biden, including: EO 14010, which expanded options for regular entry to the US; EO14011, which sought to reunify families separated when/after crossing the US-Mexico border between 2017–2021; and EO14013, which strengthened refugee resettlement programmes (JacksonLewis 23/01/2025; Federal Register 05/02/2021 a, 05/02/2021 b, and 09/02/2021).

By 11 February, legal challenges to the expansion of expedited removals and effective ban on seeking asylum (including the discontinuation of CBP One) had been mounted (Just Security accessed 07/02/2025). While court proceedings remain in progress, guidance on implementation of the above EOs is evolving (ACLU 04/02/2025). For further information on how EOs are typically implemented, see the Terminology section below.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Aim

This report analyses the impact of immigration-related EOs and other declarations issued by the US Government in January 2025 on the humanitarian needs of people on the move in Mexico. The report does not seek to provide detailed analysis of each EO and its potential implementation. Rather, this report focuses on the overall impact of more restrictive US immigration policies and increased deportations on the humanitarian situation for people on the move in Mexico.

Methodology and limitations:

This report is based on a secondary data review of publicly available sources. As information on the implementation of EOs and resulting humanitarian impact in Mexico is rapidly evolving, this analysis may not reflect the most recent developments.

Terminology

In the US, EOs are presidential directives on government implementation of existing laws and statutes. While EOs do not require congressional approval, an EO cannot override or create new federal laws and statutes, which do require congressional approval. Congress may pass laws that restrict or prevent the implementation of EOs, for example by limiting funding for implementation. EOs can also be challenged in the courts on the basis of violating the constitution or federal statutes. Implementing EOs often requires relevant federal agencies to write reports, undertake investigations, and issue new regulations, which can take months or even years (ACLU 04/02/2025; BBC 20/01/2025; ABA 25/01/2021).

This analysis covers the situation of irregular migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and IDPs in Mexico, all of whom will be affected by recent US EOs and declarations. Where these populations experience similar needs, or where sources cited do not distinguish between them, this analysis uses the term ‘people on the move’.

BACKGROUND: MIGRATION IN MEXICO

Map 1. Mexico reference map, February 2025



Source: ACAPS using OCHA shapefiles (accessed 06/02/2024)

Mexico is an origin, transit, and destination country, primarily for people on the move from Central and South America, but also from countries across Africa and Asia. Hundreds of thousands of people on the move in Mexico experience high humanitarian needs and frequent protection risks (NRC 20/12/2024; DRC/IRC 06/12/2024).

The most recent data from the Mexican Government shows over 925,000 instances of irregular migration between January–August 2024, including around 108,500 (around 12%) involving children aged 0–17 (Govt. of Mexico 01/2025). This does not reflect the total number of irregular migrants in this period, however, as people may have been identified multiple times. The highest number of instances were recorded in the southern border states of Tabasco and Chiapas (around 442,500 and 316,000 respectively), with the third highest in Baja California state on the US border (around 37,300) (Govt. of Mexico 01/2025; DRC/IRC 06/12/2024). Between January–November 2024, around 71,500 people applied for asylum in Mexico, primarily from Honduras (around 27,000), Cuba (around 16,000), and Haiti (around 9,000) (UNHCR 05/12/2024).

Violence and climate hazards have caused extensive internal displacement throughout Mexico, with up to 400,000 IDPs in 2023 according to the most recent estimates by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre.

The majority were displaced by insecurity and violence, and continuing security concerns mean many feel unable to return to their communities of origin. An October–November 2024 study based on interviews with around 285 IDP households found that 76% did not think it was safe to return (NRC/IRC 23/01/2025; UNHCR 20/12/2024; DW 13/06/2024). While internal displacement occurs across Mexico, large-scale forced displacement events in 2024 were identified in Chiapas in southern Mexico, Chihuahua, Sinaloa, and Sonora in northern Mexico, and Jalisco and Michoacán in central Mexico (DRC/IRC 06/12/2024). Many Mexican IDPs are gathered in northern states seeking entry to the US along with non-Mexican people on the move, with IDPs occupying 55% of shelter spaces in northern Mexico in 2024 (UNHCR 05/12/2024).

ANTICIPATED DEVELOPMENTS AND CRISIS IMPACT

Increased deportations of both Mexican and non-Mexican nationals from the US will increase the number of people on the move in Mexico. Between 20 January–11 February, Mexico received nearly 11,000 migrants deported from the US, including around 2,500 non-Mexican nationals (Reuters 07/02/2025). While this figure has not reached the levels anticipated by Mexican authorities, it is expected to rise in coming months, as the Trump administration implements policies that would enable US authorities to significantly expand arrests and deportations (WOLA 24/01/2025 and 07/02/2025; NIF 31/01/2025). In total, according to the most recent Migration Policy Institute estimate, there were 13.7 million 'unauthorised immigrants' in the US, 5.5 million (around 40%) of whom were from Mexico. This includes people who entered the US irregularly or overstayed their visa, people with a pending asylum application, and people with other types of temporary humanitarian protection (MPI 02/2025). In November 2024, Immigration and Customs Enforcement confirmed that over 1.45 million of these people, including around 252,100 Mexican nationals, were subject to final removal orders, making them highly vulnerable to imminent deportation (WOLA 24/01/2025; BBC 20/01/2025).

The prevention of legal entry to the US will further increase the number of people on the move in Mexico. In 2024, a total of one million people on the move (around 1,450 people daily) procured appointments to enter the US using the CBP One app (MSF 22/01/2025). Between January 2023 and October 2024, 800,000 people were granted a humanitarian waiver through this process to live and work in the US for up to two years while undergoing immigration proceedings (El País 14/10/2024; NPR 19/12/2024). By January 2025, an estimated 270,000 people were using the CBP One app in the hopes of getting an appointment to enter the US (BBC 20/01/2025; The Guardian 23/01/2025; Prensa Libre 21/01/2025; AP 21/01/2025). Many are

waiting in towns along the US-Mexico border, in Mexico City, or in the southern states of Tabasco and Chiapas, where people commonly enter Mexico from Guatemala (Border Report 23/08/2024; AP 02/09/2024).

Figure 2. Main migration routes through Mexico by August 2024



Source: DRC/IRC (03/10/2024)

Without a legal option for entering the US, some people will likely attempt illegal entry, exposing them to severe protection risks (WOLA 24/01/2025; MSF 22/01/2025). A 27–30 January International Rescue Committee (IRC) rapid needs assessment (RNA) of 243 households (around 620 people) in the northern cities of Ciudad Juárez (Chihuahua state), Matamoros (Tamaulipas state), and Tijuana (Baja California state), Mexico City, and the southern city of Tapachula (Chiapas state) found that around 40% of respondents (250 people) still intended to try and enter the US despite the EOs (IRC 06/02/2024). By 3 February, there were reports of smugglers demanding around USD 10,000 per person to smuggle people to El Paso, Texas, from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua (AJ 03/02/2024).

Non-Mexican migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees who remain in Mexico will face high humanitarian needs and protection risks. The January 2025 IRC RNA found that 44% of respondents (around 280 people) intended to integrate into Mexico, despite lacking adequate shelter, livelihoods, and the documentation required to access services and employment (IRC 06/02/2024).

People who remain in Mexico may face limited options to regularise their migration status. Many people on the move in Mexico have been waiting to enter the US for months and are ineligible to apply for asylum in Mexico, as applications must be submitted within 30 days of arriving in the country (The Guardian 23/01/2025). For those who are eligible, the cost, time required, a lack of information, and the complexity of the asylum-seeking process pose significant barriers (DW 06/02/2025; DRC/IRC 06/12/2024; IRC 06/02/2024). These factors, along with restrictive asylum policies, office closures, and a backlog of cases, contributed to a decrease in asylum claims in Mexico in 2024, with around 71,400 compared to 140,000 in 2023 (UNHCR 05/12/2024; DRC/IRC 03/10/2024 and 06/12/2024). 2024 also saw a marked decrease in the issuance of Visitor Cards for Humanitarian Reasons in Mexico, with less than 2,700 issued between January–August 2024 compared with almost 130,000 in 2023. These visitor cards give asylum seekers the right to legally live and seek employment in Mexico for one year (DRC/IRC 06/12/2024).

Some people on the move who remain in Mexico may be returned to unsafe countries of origin. In January 2025, the Government of Mexico announced that it will return non-Mexican migrants with irregular status to their countries of origin, including Ecuador, Haiti, and Venezuela (The Guardian 21/01/2025). By 7 February, the government had returned an unspecified number of people to Honduras, describing the returns as voluntary (Reuters 07/02/2025). That said, it is unclear whether the Government of Mexico will have the resources or capacity to engage in large-scale deportations. According to the most recent data, from January–August 2024, Mexico returned around 16,475 people to their countries of origin, including over 8,400 (around 50%) to Guatemala and around 6,300 (nearly 40%) to Honduras (Govt. of Mexico 01/2025). This number is far lower than the number of people on the move in Mexico without regular migration status.

CRISIS IMPACTS: CURRENT AND ANTICIPATED

Protection

The closure of many legal avenues for entry into the US will increase the number of people relying on organised crime-affiliated smugglers to cross the border, likely taking riskier routes to avoid detection. This will increase risks of extortion, trafficking, kidnapping, and associated protection threats, including gender-based violence, against people on the move (WOLA 24/01/2025; MSF 22/01/2025).

People on the move will also face severe protection risks if they remain in Mexico, where violence against people on the move increased in 2024 (DRC/IRC 06/12/2024). UNHCR's latest (October 2024) mixed movements monitoring survey of nearly 1,100 people on the move across Mexico found that around 60% of an unspecified number of respondents in northern states had experienced a protection incident, most frequently theft (24%), kidnapping (17%), and extortion (15%) (UNHCR et al. 07/01/2025).

Kidnapping, in particular, has increased since mid-2023, targeting people on the move when they are travelling and in shelters, especially in northern Mexico. In 2024, there was a notable increase in kidnappings of people on the move waiting for CBP One appointments in the northern border state of Tamaulipas. The southern border state of Chiapas, northern border state of Chihuahua, and southern Veracruz state also saw a large number of reported kidnappings (DRC/IRC 06/12/2024). When kidnapped, women and girls are especially vulnerable to gender-based violence, including rape (AI 08/05/2024). Cartels (groups of gangs) typically demand between USD 1,000–10,000 for the release of individuals, who are forced to work for cartels if they or their families cannot pay. In general, organised criminal groups frequently subject people on the move to labour and sexual exploitation, taking advantage of their lack of resources and livelihoods (OHCHR 18/12/2024).

Many people experiencing these protection threats already have pre-existing protection needs because of human rights violations experienced during their journeys to Mexico, including through the dangerous Darien Gap, and in their countries of origin (AI 08/05/2024; HRW 03/04/2024; DRC/IRC 06/12/2024).

People on the move who remain in Mexico are also increasingly vulnerable to detention, with over 1.4 million detained in 2024, nearly double the 779,000 detained in 2023. There are around 50 centres across the country, known as temporary stays or migrant holding centres. Detention conditions are often inadequate, with reports of people held incommunicado, denied access to legal assistance, basic services (including healthcare), and WASH facilities,

and experiencing torture and cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment. Women, including pregnant women, and children have minimal access to specialised care while detained (Milenio 29/01/2025; DRC/IRC 06/12/2024; MSF 21/01/2025; Global Detention Project 02/2021).

In exchange for a 30-day suspension of US tariffs against Mexico, which the new US administration initially imposed at the beginning of February, the Mexican Government agreed to deploy 10,000 security personnel to the border to conduct anti-drug trafficking operations (AP 04/02/2025; BBC 04/02/2025). This may increase protection risks for people on the move, particularly those in rural areas along the US border, as they could be caught in the middle of fighting between security forces and armed criminal groups.

Shelter

There will likely be insufficient shelter to accommodate people on the move, particularly non-Mexican nationals, who are unable to enter or are deported from the US. Thousands of people on the move, including children, were already living on the streets or in precarious, temporary accommodation while waiting for CBP One appointments, primarily in the capital, Mexico City (NRC 20/12/2024; UNHCR 05/12/2024). UNHCR's October 2024 mixed movements monitoring survey found that 19% of an unspecified number of respondents in Mexico City lived in informal camps, 12% lived in temporary shelters, 10% were homeless, and 14% were guests with host families (UNHCR et al. 07/01/2025). A July 2024 rapid assessment of shelters and informal camps in Mexico City found that people in informal camps slept in makeshift shelters exposed to the elements, with no access to basic WASH services (NRC 07/2024). The high number of people on the move living on the streets has increased social tensions with host communities (UNHCR 05/12/2024).

Shelter conditions are also inadequate in northern and southern towns with a high concentration of people on the move. The IRC's January 2025 RNA found that 44% of around 620 survey respondents in the northern cities of Ciudad Juárez, Matamoros, and Tijuana, Mexico City, and the southern city of Tapachula reported shelter needs (IRC 06/02/2025).

Food security and livelihoods

Thousands of people on the move who had secured appointments through the CBP One app had already quit their jobs and sold their belongings in preparation for their asylum appointments at the border. Many will be unable to recoup these costs, leaving them without resources (MSF 22/01/2025; The Guardian 23/01/2025).

Food and livelihood needs were already high among people on the move in Mexico, who lack the resources necessary to meet their basic needs. During journeys to and through Mexico,

people on the move are frequently subjected to extortion by smugglers, armed criminal groups, and Mexican authorities and security forces, leaving people on the move with minimal resources by the time they reach Mexico City or the northern border. An October–November 2023 Amnesty International survey of over 350 asylum seekers at border crossing towns in Mexico and the US found that over 66% (around 240) faced extortion at least once on their journey through Mexico (AI 08/05/2024).

People on the move without legal immigration status in Mexico also lack the right to formal employment. Some find work informally, exposing them to high risks of labour exploitation, including underpayment and non-payment (NRC 07/2024; JRS 09/2023). Others do not feel safe leaving shelters and seeking work because of pervasive violence and discrimination against people on the move (AI 08/05/2024; JRS 09/2023). Even Mexican IDPs struggle to obtain livelihoods. An October–November 2024 study based on interviews with around 285 Mexican IDP households, including those recently deported from the US, living in four border towns (Ciudad Juárez, Monterrey, Nogales, and Tijuana), found that only 25% of respondents had a source of income, largely because of a lack of opportunities and documentation, which many had either never possessed or lost (NRC/IRC 23/01/2025).

Health, mental health, and psychosocial support needs

A rise in the number of people on the move in Mexico will likely increase the number of people needing access to care, putting further strain on host community health facilities. Many people on the move in Mexico have health problems from travelling long distances in the heat without access to water, health, and other basic services, leading to respiratory, skin, gastrointestinal, and muscular-skeletal diseases (MSF 16/12/2024). Children under five are particularly vulnerable to acute diarrhoea, skin infections, and respiratory infections (MSF 27/05/2024). Severe drought in the northern Mexican states of Chihuahua, Durango, Sinaloa, and Sonora, forecasted to persist until at least March 2025, will increase risks of dehydration, heat exhaustion, and other health issues (LuzNoticias 31/01/2025; Meteored 29/01/2025).

While all people in Mexico, including those on the move, have the right to access public healthcare, people on the move frequently face barriers including discrimination, a lack of information, and low capacity, discouraging some from seeking assistance (DRC/IRC 06/12/2024; Infante et al. 14/07/2022). People on the move requiring more specialised care for chronic conditions often lack the funds needed to pay for tests, medication, and other services (JRS 09/2023). Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has observed more people on the move with chronic conditions, including diabetes and hypertension, seeking care in northern Mexican border cities, as they delay care to travel as quickly as possible through Central America and southern Mexico (MSF 27/05/2024). Pregnant and breastfeeding women on the move are more likely to have unmet healthcare needs, as are Haitian and other non-Spanish-speaking people (DRC/IRC 06/12/2024; MSF 27/05/2024).

The cancellation of appointments and avenues to claim asylum in the US has led to significant anxiety and fear among people on the move (MSF 22/01/2025). Many have pre-existing mental health and psychosocial support needs after dangerous journeys to and through Mexico, where they are subject to torture, sexual violence, robbery, extortion, and lack of access to basic services (MSF 16/12/2024). Of around 3,820 mental health consultations provided by MSF in to people on the move in Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico in 2023, around 50% of patients were experiencing acute stress (MSF 27/05/2024). It is likely that the sudden uncertainty surrounding migration options will increase the prevalence of this diagnosis.

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Violence and insecurity

In July 2024, ACLED classified Mexico as the second-most dangerous conflict for civilians globally. Conflict between gangs, cartels, and security forces across Mexico involves extensive violence against civilians, killing an average of 30,000 people annually between 2018–2024. By May 2024, the US military estimated that cartels controlled about one-third of Mexico, with particularly high levels of political violence in the central-southern states of Guerrero, Jalisco, Michoacán, Queretaro, and the northern state of Tamaulipas in the first half of the year (ACLED accessed 30/01/2025; CFR 09/10/2024). Civilians are frequently subject to kidnapping, arbitrary detention, sexual violence, extortion, and theft perpetrated by both armed criminal groups and state security forces (CFR 09/10/2024). People on the move are particularly vulnerable to violence by all conflict parties (DRC/IRC 06/12/2024).

Climate hazards

Mexico is highly vulnerable to climate hazards, particularly hurricanes during the June–November season and other hydrometeorological hazards, as a result of its location (between two oceans), latitude, and topography (WB accessed 29/01/2025). Mexico's INFORM Climate Change risk score is 5/10 (high), with a score of 8.7/10 for exposure to hurricanes (EC accessed 29/01/2025). Severe hurricanes in 2023–2024, including Hurricane Otis (November 2023) and Hurricane John (October 2024), caused significant, repeated damage to shelter, WASH, and livelihoods in Pacific states including Guerrero, Michoacán, and Oaxaca, with John affecting communities still recovering from Otis (El Pais 15/05/2024; Direct Relief 05/11/2024; ACAPS 31/10/2024). People on the move living in temporary shelters or on the streets are particularly vulnerable to shelter damage and associated humanitarian needs caused by climate hazards in Mexico.

Mexico's northern states are also vulnerable to drought, with severe events since the end of 2022 contributing to dehydration and associated illness and death among people on the move (NOAA 22/07/2024; BBC 28/11/2023). By January 2025, 66% of municipalities in northern Mexico were experiencing some level of drought, which is expected to last through May 2025 (Meteored 29/01/2025enfrentan%20alg%C3%BAAn%20grado%20de%20sequ%C3%ADa."; NASA 30/07/2024; TecnoTanques 07/01/2025).

HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

The Government of Mexico is preparing for an influx of Mexican nationals deported from the US, including by building large reception centres near the US border, in Baja California, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Sonora, and Tamaulipas states. The centres, which include large tents and mobile kitchens, are operated by security forces. The Government's response plan also includes preparations to transport people to their communities of origin and provide livelihood and social support (MSF 31/01/2025; Diario Contra Réplica 21/01/2025; Govt. of Mexico 21/01/2025; NYT 23/01/2025). The plan is intended to support deported Mexican nationals, although the Government has indicated that it will also receive non-Mexican nationals before assisting with repatriation to their countries of origin (NYT 23/01/2025). That said, non-Mexican nationals will not receive the same levels of Government assistance as Mexican nationals (DW 06/02/2025).

Aside from the Government response, UN agencies, INGOs, and local NGOs provide health, mental health, and psychosocial support services alongside shelter, protection, and other humanitarian assistance to people on the move throughout Mexico (DW 06/02/2025; MSF 16/12/2024; NRC 20/12/2024). UNHCR and the IOM co-lead the inter-agency Group on Human Mobility, which includes UN organisations, INGOs, NGOs, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (UNHCR 05/12/2024).

The 90-day pause and potential elimination of all US foreign assistance programmes threaten the humanitarian response for people on the move stranded in Mexico. In 2024, 97.5% of all humanitarian funding in Mexico came from the US, including 85% of UNHCR funds, indicating the likelihood of a severe funding shortfall following the Trump administration's suspension of foreign aid (OCHA accessed 10/02/2025; UNHCR 23/01/2025; WOLA 31/01/2025). It is unclear whether other donors are planning to fill the gap left by the suspension of US assistance.