

NO QUEDA DE OTRA:

An Exploration of the Root Causes of
Migration to the Southern Border



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The **Hope Border Institute** (HOPE) brings the perspective of Catholic social teaching to bear on the realities unique to our US-Mexico border region. Through a robust program of research and policy work, leadership development and action, we work to build justice and deepen solidarity across the borderlands.

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Border Observatory. No Queda De Otra: An Exploration of the Root Causes of Migration to the Southern Border

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Paso del Norte port of entry connecting Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua and El Paso, Texas.

Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a steady exodus of migrants from Mexico and Central America, particularly Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.¹ Children, families and vulnerable adults are the face of this phenomenon. They increasingly find themselves stuck between their home countries' inability to protect and provide for them and receiving countries' unwillingness to honor their basic rights or invest in their dignity and safety as migrants. Security forces and geography in third countries of passage, particularly Mexico, are deployed in tandem to violently deter migrants from reaching US territory. The results are tragic and avoidable.

We can do better for them.

HOPE co-founded the Root Causes Initiative in 2019 to bring the perspective of a border faith organization to the vision of constructing a new relationship between the US, Central America and Mexico. This relationship should be based on mutual respect, upholding the right to migrate with dignity and safety and making real change that will ensure people can build livelihoods and futures at home.

The research project that culminated in this report was conducted over the course of two months in Ciudad Juárez. We interviewed dozens of people on the move and posed the question: "What led you to leave your home?" The answers revealed a convergence of human-made hardship, economies of exploitation, pure lack and natural disaster that made it difficult for people to grow and thrive in their communities of origin--and ultimately compelled them to migrate.

We found that the traditional drivers of forced migration--including poverty, violence, absence of the rule of law and criminal control over lives and livelihoods--are continuing to push people out of Central America and Mexico, but the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change are compounding these push factors. Vulnerable groups such as women, families, young people and LGBTQ+ individuals are at the forefront of this trend.



Methodology

Our participants came from as far away as Ecuador, Colombia and Cuba. The majority were from southern Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.

51 in-person interviews were conducted in three migrant shelters in Ciudad Juárez.² Each participant received \$15 for their time. Mental health support was made available through a partnership with Jesuit Refugee Services' Caminar Contigo Border Project.

While the research was primarily geared towards understanding migration from Central America and how climate is acting as a push factor, we kept an open format to ensure that a range of migration experiences were included. To protect their anonymity, we use pseudonyms in this report. This map pinpoints each participants' region of origin.

Survey questions were designed to understand each person's community of origin, economic status, access to basic necessities like food, water and healthcare and individual reasons for migrating. The survey also asked people to describe how they were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and Hurricanes Eta and Iota.

In addition to the in-person interviews, which were conducted with appropriate COVID-19 safety protocols in place, we did background research into each participants' hometown. This gave us a fuller picture of the economy, climate and social landscape of each persons' community of origin.



Families at the US port of entry waiting to be processed and have their Asylum case heard.

Major Findings

While Mexican migrants tended to cite violence and threats as their primary reason for fleeing, there was a greater diversity of causes among Central Americans, who described poverty, gang violence or domestic violence as their primary reason for migrating. We encountered a significant number of internally displaced Mexicans in the interview process, many from a small geographic area of Michoacán. They described fleeing from a war-like conflict between cartels characterized by extreme violence and widespread forced conscription of men and boys.

- Approximately 60% of those we interviewed migrated as part of a family, typically parents and children. We encountered several multi-generational Mexican families who fled together, including a family of 18 fleeing Michoacán.
- Around 60% of those interviewed were internally displaced in their country of origin before attempting to migrate to the US. Internal relocation was only a temporary solution for many because it did not resolve the original pressures they faced at home. In the case of internally displaced Central Americans, twin hurricanes in November 2020 complicated the ability to rebuild their lives in-country and prompted out-migration.
- Threats and extortion by criminal gangs played a major role in most participants' decision to flee. Threats affected both basic safety and the ability to earn a living. The ferocity, persistence and reach of gangs and criminal

groups was astounding. Nearly all who described being threatened said that they had attempted to report the threats to authorities, only to be dismissed or ignored.

- Nearly everyone we interviewed said their income in their country of origin was insufficient to cover basic needs. Families with special healthcare needs (such as a disability) experienced added levels of poverty and insecurity. The pandemic had an almost universally negative impact on personal economic security as a result of lockdowns and market closures.
- Women and LGBTQ+ individuals experienced both generalized and gender-based violence in their country of origin and along the migratory route. The perpetrators they described were violent, persistent and willing to go to extreme lengths to maintain control over their victims. In leaving their abusers, women faced loss of income, poverty and greater vulnerability as single women with children. Two layers of perceived protection—authorities and family—could not or would not offer protection, leaving migration as their last option.
- Hurricanes Eta and Iota, which hit large swathes of Central America in November 2020, destroyed homes and crops and set back people who were already experiencing extreme poverty. Those already living on the edge cited the hurricanes as the final straw in their decision to migrate.

Central American Migration

Interviews with Central American migrants revealed layered experiences of harm and weak safety nets that ultimately pushed people to flee their homes. We encountered both families and single adults in a state of limbo, living in shelters after having been expelled from the US or turned away at ports of entry while seeking asylum. Many had made the shelter their world, building community, helping to manage the facility and discerning their next steps even as they grappled with what they had been through and tried to meet the needs of family members spread across the continent. They were acutely aware that to step out into Ciudad Juárez would be to expose themselves to harm from police, government agents and criminal organizations.

Gender-based violence and gang threats came up again and again as primary motivations for migrating. However, chronic underlying poverty and the double blow of the pandemic and hurricanes deepened vulnerability, stripped away social cushioning and empowered bad actors in ways that left people with few options other than to migrate.

For example, Luz, a woman from San Pedro Sula, Honduras, had a degree in marketing, a good job at a bank and a home in a gated community where she was raising two sons as a single mother. When the pandemic began, her salary at the bank was cut by 65% and she took out a \$5,000 lempira (approximately \$200 USD) cash loan to cover basic expenses. The lenders began extorting her after she had paid off the loan and forced her to pay them over \$70,000 lempiras (approximately \$3,000 USD) as they stalked her, photographed her coming and going to work and made death threats. She tried to report the crime at two separate police stations but was told at both to keep paying. While family support helped her cope with the greatest dangers, it was not enough to stop the extortion. Several months later in Ciudad Juárez, she was still suffering sadness, depression and guilt from having left one son in hiding in Honduras because she could not pay to travel with both.

Luz's story is an example of the blow the pandemic dealt to the middle class throughout Latin America and the way that criminal groups seized the opportunity to take advantage of vulnerable and desperate people.

“There are days we eat and days we don't eat.”

Those who were very poor to begin with also saw their thin safety net stripped away in 2020. As defined by our participants, poverty was marked by insufficient income, scarcity of work, food insecurity, lack of access to healthcare and distance from sources of water.

POVERTY IN LATIN AMERICA³

- Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) reduced poverty by half between the early 2000's and 2014.
- In 2018, more households in LAC were middle class than poor or vulnerable.
- LAC economy contracted by 6.5% in 2020, the highest contraction ever recorded.
- 4.7 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean were pushed out of the middle class into poverty in 2020.

Marta, a 44 year-old woman from San Martín Jilotepeque, Chimaltenango in Guatemala, put it plainly: “There are days we eat and days we don't eat.” Marta is a single mother who raised six children in a *casa de lamina* (home made of tin). Aside from odd jobs like doing laundry or occasional agricultural work, she and her older children struggled to find employment and her abusive ex-husband provided no support. Food costs were high and water had to be hauled from a distance six times a day. Her daughter has a condition that left her paralyzed and needing regular treatment that is only available in Guatemala City, an expensive proposition that required Marta to take out loans and travel with her daughter over the course of a year to get care.

With the onset of the pandemic, Marta lost what little work she had and couldn't go out to markets to buy essentials. During the hurricanes, wind destroyed the crops they had planted and rain caused a leak in the roof. She noted that temperatures in her area had gotten hotter over the years.

Unable to read or write herself, Marta wants to make sure her children can study and grow up well. In the absence of other support or a leg up, she decided to migrate with her youngest son (10 years old) so they can live with a brother in New Jersey and make money to send back to the family. She and her son tried to cross the border but were expelled under the Title 42 policy, leaving them with few options for reaching that goal.



Migrant families staying in a shelter in Ciudad Juárez.

Mexican Migration

In our research, we encountered a large number of migrants who had recently arrived from Michoacán and Guerrero, Mexico, as well as the states of Veracruz and Guanajuato.

Interviewees were primarily agricultural workers or small business owners. All were subject to some form of extortion, in many cases paying up to half of their income to cartels, even after the pandemic shut down the consumer economy and prevented agricultural produce from making its way to market.

Migrants from Michoacán (many of whom came from towns within a 35-mile radius of each other) stood out as people whose relatively stable lives had been suddenly disrupted by an explosion of violence fueled by conflict between criminal organizations. The intensification of a turf war between the Jalisco Nueva Generación Cartel and Cárteles Unidos, a coalition of criminal groups,⁴ prompted many families to flee. They described intense levels of violence that included rampant killings, the use of drones and the destruction of roads and highways to prevent people from leaving. Businesses and clinics closed, prices increased due to quotas and panic-buying drove people to grocery stores, resulting in shortages. Men were subject to indiscriminate forced conscription by cartels.

One family from Ciudad Hidalgo, Michoacán owned a small bakery known for its *pan de nata*. Their income of about \$5,200 pesos a week (about \$260 USD) was enough to live on even when accounting for a weekly quota of \$1,200

pesos paid to Cartel los Correa. Their best customers were worshipers leaving Catholic mass on Sundays, so they lost significant income when the pandemic started and masses were cancelled. Despite this hardship, the extortion continued. The requests for money grew and the family became afraid after a business owner in town was killed and her business set on fire for refusing to pay the quota. Attempts to report the threats to authorities were ignored and they fled to Ciudad Juárez.

While some fled in anticipation of violence, others abandoned their homes after they had already been targeted and authorities were unable to offer justice or prevent future violence. A family from Michoacán went to the *procuraduría general* (attorney general) in their town to report a neighbors' threats against their 23 year-old son and five daughters. No action was taken and the neighbor murdered their son, who had just become a father, in March of 2021. The neighbor was arrested and put in jail, but the family was deeply afraid of his potential release and retaliation by his connections. When they pleaded with the president of their municipality for protection, he told them it was not his concern. Having filed an official police report, raised their fears with local authorities to no avail and considered a sit-in to demand justice and protection, their attorney advised them to flee. The extended family of 18 people made their way to a shelter in Ciudad Juárez with the goal of seeking asylum in the US.

Threats and Extortion

Nearly 70% of our interviewees were extorted or threatened by a criminal organization or gang at some point in their life. Despite having few resources to hand over, gangs pursued them with an incredible degree of persistence and violence. An unanswered question from the research is whether the extortion our participants experienced was explicitly designed to displace them or whether gangs sought to extract as much as possible from them while they could.

Small business owners and poor or middle class people from Mexico and Central America described extortion as an expected component of earning a living. Up to half of their personal or business income was taken by a criminal organization on a weekly basis, making it difficult to meet ordinary needs and provide for extraordinary expenses like healthcare for a disabled family member. The consequences of not paying were dire and made explicit by extortionists, as illustrated by the story of the businesswoman from Michoacán who was murdered for her refusal to comply.

Rather than continuing to extract a set rate, extortionists steadily upped their demands and pressure on victims until it became too much to bear. Appeals to authorities went unanswered and many interviewees voiced a suspicion that police were complicit in crime.

Others we interviewed became the targets of unwanted affection or associations that turned violent. Tina, a 22 year-old woman from Tegucigalpa, Honduras, was stalked by a gang member who forced her to have a relationship with him. He and the gang became so threatening that she left school and moved with her mother to a small town. When she tried to return to her studies in the capital, the stalking continued and she fled for Mexico. She found work in Tapachula, Chiapas but experienced discrimination and abuse for being Honduran. After a new partner in Mexico became violent and

abusive, she decided to come to the border to seek asylum.

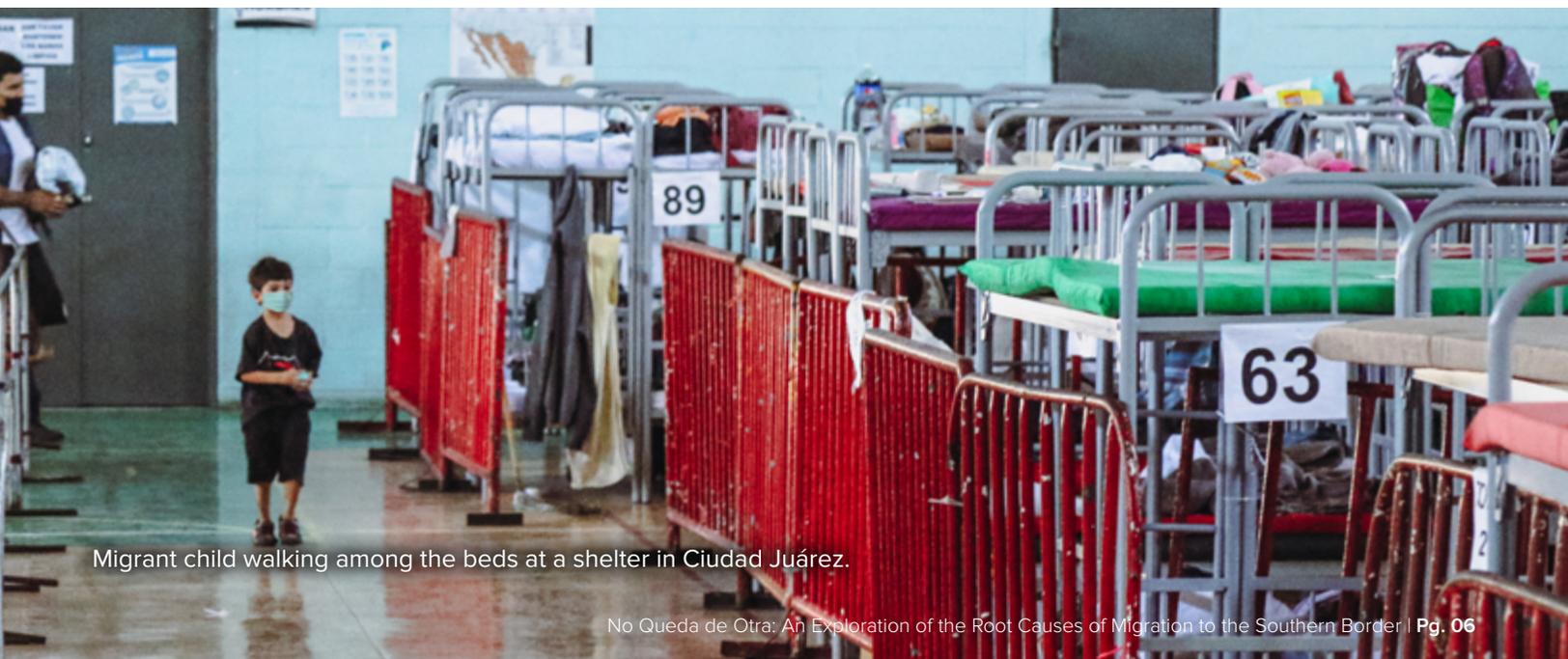
Some victims of extortion and threats were forced to weigh their relative economic and social stability with the ongoing violence inflicted on them. Manuel, a 50 year-old man from El Salvador, owned a small store where he made \$10 to \$12 dollars a day. A gang extorted him for money and he refused to cooperate. In retaliation, the gang tortured and threatened to kill him. Manuel was forced to leave his wife and two children in hiding while he fled to the border.

Manuel's family was insulated from the worst effects of the

“I left my country because of death threats. I thought I would find peace in Mexico.”

-Manuel

pandemic by government support and food assistance. He was vaccinated against COVID-19 and his family had access to food, water and education. Despite having no desire to leave El Salvador, his calculus of stability was upended by what he experienced at the hands of the gangs and he became the first person in his family to migrate. He felt vulnerable and discriminated against in Mexico as a Salvadoran and was robbed by police officers in Ciudad Juárez.



Migrant child walking among the beds at a shelter in Ciudad Juárez.



Memorial at the US port of entry dedicated to the victims of femicide in Ciudad Juárez.

Gender-Based Violence

Physical, sexual and psychological abuse were a devastating through-line of many interviews with women and LGBTQ+ individuals. Women leaving their abusive partners or families had to overcome a daunting series of obstacles to reach safety, and some were still fearful within the confines of migrant shelters. Authorities could not create even a modest barrier between the abuser and the victim. Family networks provided some support, but it was not enough to make staying an option.

Internal relocation was often a temporary solution, but women who internally relocated (usually with their children) faced poverty worsened by the pandemic and hurricanes in Central America. Their abusers often followed them to their new location or found ways of exercising control from a distance. For example, we interviewed women from southern Mexico who were still afraid that their ex-partners would find them in shelters in Ciudad Juárez.

“No quedaba de otra.”
There was no other option.

Others were caught between the possibility of building a new life in the United States or returning home. Juliana, a spirited indigenous 19 year-old woman from Guatemala, was studying to become a police officer and loved the greenery and beauty of the Quiché Department where she was born. Her whole family (a brother and three sisters) was supported by the income her father sent back from working gardening and construction in Phoenix, Arizona. Juliana’s father moved to the US when she was three and her mother died when she was 10, leaving her under the care of her terribly abusive older brother. He treated her and her sisters like slaves, frequently beating them and inflicting psychological cruelty like excluding her from family games and meals. Her father, extended family and neighbors were all unwilling or unable to intervene to stop the abuse.

She attempted to move to another municipality, but her brother pursued her and nearly killed her. When she turned 18, she got a restraining order from the police against him, but her father persuaded her to drop the report and travel to the US with her younger sister. At the time of our interview, she was torn between returning to the life she had been building in Guatemala and hopefully finding safety with a newly married sister or trying to find a way to join her father in Arizona. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), which she was in touch with about arranging a return trip to Guatemala, was unwilling to assist her because they did not feel that she would be safe upon return. With almost nonexistent options for seeking asylum in the US, she was effectively stuck in the middle in Ciudad Juárez.

Several trans women we interviewed survived horrific violence and discrimination in their communities of origin. One woman, Carla from El Salvador, was bullied and discriminated against from childhood. She survived sexual assault at age 12 and was kidnapped at 14. Gangs took advantage of her gender identity to pressure her into acting as a mule for them against her will. She had a bachelor’s degree, a business as a snack vendor, a scholarship to study English and a supportive family, but the power of the gangs and authorities’ failure to step in led her to leave El Salvador. In Carla’s words, “no quedaba de otra.” There was no other option.

Three trans women we interviewed--two from Veracruz and one from Guatemala--moved to Mexico City after experiencing discrimination, harassment and threats at home. Celeste went to stylist school and did sex work in Mexico City, but was deported from the country back to Guatemala. The two Mexican women--Pamela and Flor--thrived for a time in the capital but then encountered threats, official indifference to their plight and discrimination in trying to access jobs and healthcare. They found themselves at the US-Mexico border with no clear path forward.

Pandemic

Most of our interviewees experienced the pandemic as a deepening of poverty and economic instability rather than as sickness. Interviewees mentioned job loss, market closures and not being able to leave their homes as obstacles to meeting their family’s needs. Movement outside of the home was heavily policed by authorities and even criminal groups, which had a particular impact on people trying to earn money as street vendors. Honoria, a woman from Nueva Italia, Michoacán who escaped from her abusive husband, mentioned that he worked for a gang that patrolled the streets rounding up people who were out past curfew or business owners who refused to close. Having arrived in Ciudad Juárez, she was fearful for the health and safety of her parents in Nueva Italia and worried that her ex-partner might harm them or trace her whereabouts to the border.

A lack of basic services also hurt people during the pandemic. Ophelia, a woman who left Guatemala with her husband and son, said that she had trouble finding essentials during the lockdown. Her son didn’t go to school during that time. Her husband worked in another town and sometimes couldn’t get a bus back home for months. When he returned, they couldn’t deposit his paychecks because of bank closures and curfews.

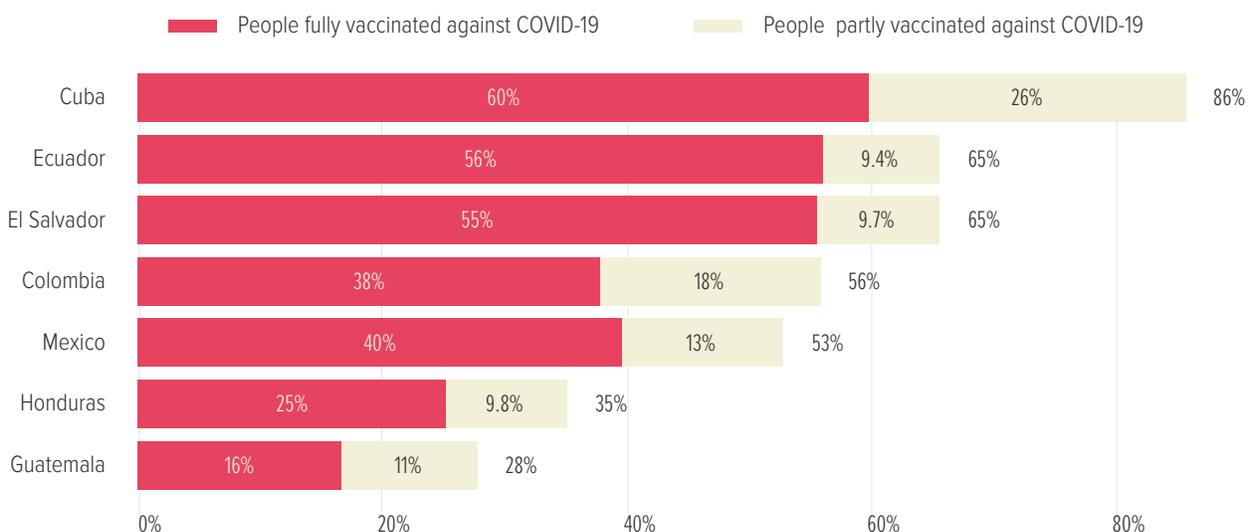
Some interviewees received government assistance in the form of food baskets. Manuel, the 50 year-old man from El Salvador, noted that the government distributed a monthly food basket, which cushioned the economic impact for his family. Manuel was also one of two participants who received a COVID-19 vaccine; the second was a young mortician from Michoacán who got a Russian vaccine. Guadalupe, a 36 year-old woman from Honduras whose story is featured below, said that the Honduran government distributed food baskets

that were far smaller than what was promised, so much so that memes circulated comparing what the government said it would distribute with what families actually received. She volunteered to help with food distribution in her town in order to earn extra rations.

We asked participants about the availability of healthcare in their area. Residents of rural communities had fewer options than those in urban areas, and many people had no access or extremely limited access to even basic care. Emergency healthcare during the pandemic did not appear to be the greatest concern of our participants; rather, they worried about the availability and cost of regular healthcare, particularly for family members with disabilities or special needs. The expense of specialist treatments and medication was a major issue, especially for families barely making ends meet or forced to make extortion payments to gangs. Aldo, a young man from La Ceiba, Honduras, said that his mother had a bone disease that made it hard for her to walk or work. He and his brother supported her, but healthcare expenses on top of extortion payments were too much for him to cover with the income he made working in a kitchen and bike shop. His goal was to find work in the US and eventually bring his mother to be with him.

Traveling while attempting to care for family members with special needs was a particular challenge. Concepción, a woman from Guatemala, was migrating with her three year-old daughter to escape gang threats, the impact of the hurricanes and a lack of work. The baby had a cleft palate and needed a second surgery to follow up on the first. Concepción’s priority was making it into the US so her daughter could get the surgery and follow-up healthcare.

People vaccinated against COVID-19⁵



Climate Displacement

Hurricanes Eta and Iota made landfall two weeks apart in November 2020, affecting over nine million people in Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Colombia.⁶

Several interviewees who described themselves as living in poverty saw their homes and crops destroyed by rain and fierce winds. Sara, a 43 year-old woman from a small community in Huehuetenango, Guatemala, lived in a home made of earth with a tin roof. She made 15 quetzales (about \$2 USD) per day doing laundry and cutting wood in the absence of more steady work, hauled water from outside her home and struggled to manage her colic and gastritis. She noted that drought in the summer and heavy flooding during hurricane season had become a feature of life. This precarity came full circle when the hurricanes destroyed her home entirely.

Others who described themselves as more middle class were impacted--but not devastated--by the hurricanes. Luz, the woman from Honduras mentioned earlier who lived in a gated community and worked in a bank, said there was flooding on her street that did not reach her home. Juliana, the young indigenous woman from Guatemala, notes that the hurricanes damaged a small second property that had mostly sentimental value, but her family's primary home was unaffected.

Higher levels of education and greater access to resources seemed to correlate with insulation from the worst effects of the hurricanes. However, those who depended on agriculture for subsistence or work and had fewer resources in place were devastated. Catalina, an indigenous woman from a small community in Huehuetenango, spoke Popti and some Spanish. Her primarily agricultural community (where people mostly grew cabbage, corn and potatoes) was gravely harmed by the hurricanes and unusual rain patterns in recent years.

Like many participants, she noted changes in the climate and weather of the region, including more extreme fluctuations in precipitation and hotter temperatures.



Impact of Hurricane Eta in Central America.



Zaragoza port of entry in Ciudad Juárez.

Immigration Enforcement

While root causes were the focus of this research, we also asked our participants questions about their journey to reach the border, whether and how they tried to cross into the US and what they experienced in Ciudad Juárez. Closure of the US border to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and the US government's reliance on Mexico to deter migrants on their journey north factored heavily into participants' stories. They described an increased level of interaction with Mexican immigration enforcement and predation by smugglers during the trip. In several cases, expulsion under the Title 42 pandemic policy led to kidnapping in northern Mexico or the decision to separate from minor children and send them ahead into the US.⁷ Lack of access to the ports of entry led people to cross in the desert, where some found the journey so physically difficult that they called Mexican or American border authorities for help.

Some had attempted to cross between ports but were expelled. Luz crossed the border with her son near Mc Allen, Texas and was apprehended by Border Patrol. She was held in Border Patrol custody for two days and then told she would be flown to El Paso. Instead, she and her son were expelled to Ciudad Juárez under the Title 42 expulsion policy and were received by a migrant shelter, where they stayed for several months until being admitted into the US under an exemption policy created for vulnerable migrants.

Cecilia from El Salvador, a woman fleeing sexual harassment from a gang member, attempted to cross the border near Arizona but couldn't physically handle the crossing and called Border Patrol for help. Agents took her to a hospital and expelled her to Nogales, Sonora once she was stable.

She traveled to Ciudad Juárez after hearing that political asylum was available in El Paso but was then kidnapped.

A couple from Colombia fleeing persecution by the army traveled through Mexico by bus in order to reach the border. At least twice, the buses they were on were stopped by Mexican security forces. Because they were Colombian and lacked Mexican documents, agents extorted them for \$1,000 pesos per person in order to allow them to continue traveling. When they reached the border, they presented themselves at an international bridge to request political asylum but were turned away. They then went to a Mexican migration office to attempt to submit an asylum application in the US but were told the border was closed. A final effort to cross in the desert was unsuccessful and they were expelled.

Participants also remarked that their lives revolved around staying within the shelter because they felt unsafe in Ciudad Juárez. On the few occasions when they did go out, they felt that both authorities and gangs were watching them.

Two participants traveling with minor children were separated from them as a result of the Title 42 exception for unaccompanied children. Juliana from Guatemala crossed the border with her 17 year-old sister. They were both taken into custody, but Juliana was expelled when Border Patrol realized she was an adult. Her sister was sent to a shelter for unaccompanied minors and was reunited with their father in Arizona, while Juliana was left with no options but to stay in the shelter in Ciudad Juárez.

Case Studies

Guadalupe, Honduras

Guadalupe, a 36 year-old woman from Siguatepeque in west-central Honduras, ran a motorcycle shop with her husband of 18 years while they raised two daughters and a son. In 2018, she discovered that her husband had been giving drugs to her six and nine year-old daughters and sexually abusing them. She appealed to her husband's family for help, but they denied the abuse and threatened to harm her if she went to the police. Guadalupe separated from him and moved her children to a town four hours away, where she rented a room and started a job selling clothes but didn't make enough to cover food, rent and living expenses. Her husband kept all of their property, forced her to sign a document waiving her right to child support and continued to stalk her and threaten to take her kids back.

When the pandemic began, Guadalupe lost her source of income and tried to make money by selling tamales on the street, but they were confiscated by police. While the government provided some food support, it was far less than what was promised and so she volunteered in neighborhood food distribution to earn extra rations. During the hurricanes in November, the wall of her rented home fell down and the landlord would no longer let them stay.

Poverty, disaster and the need to escape fully from her ex-husband led Guadalupe to pay a coyote to take her and her youngest daughter to the border, while she left a daughter and son in hiding with family members to protect them from her ex-husband. She and her daughter presented themselves at a port of entry in Ciudad Juárez in early August but were turned away under the Title 42 expulsion policy. They slept on the street for five days, during which her daughter contracted chickenpox. Desperate and with no recourse, she decided to send her daughter alone across the border, where she was held in a shelter for unaccompanied minors for three months before being reunited with family in the US. In Ciudad Juárez, Guadalupe was kidnapped and held in a stash house for 12 days. She was sexually assaulted and forced to lie to her family over the phone about her wellbeing while asking them to pay a ransom, an experience that devastated her.

Guadalupe was living and working in the shelter at the time of our interview. An active and resilient woman, she was

still suffering terribly from the trauma of her journey and separation from her children.

Her story is illustrative of the compounded suffering and multiple pressure points that build to forced migration. The Honduran state was unable to protect Guadalupe and her children from her ex-husband or cushion them from the impact of the pandemic and hurricanes. Family networks dismissed the abuse she and her children experienced and actively threatened her. She moved to another part of Honduras prior to emigrating but could not escape predation and the economic vice grip of the pandemic. Subjected to the Title 42 policy at the border, she sent her daughter ahead into the US, a choice increasingly made by desperate parents stranded in northern Mexico.⁸

Yenis, Cuba

Yenis, a 41 year-old man from Camaguey, Cuba, is an adventurer. While the majority of the migrants we interviewed were fleeing some form of harm and seeking basic safety and survival, his story is a reminder that migration can also be a way of fulfilling a dream.

Yenis was raised on a ranch owned by his mother in Cuba. He is a skilled *vaquero* and also has a passion for rodeo and bull-riding that prompted him to migrate. In order to avoid low pay and poor economic conditions in Cuba and get involved in the bull-riding scene in Mexico, he moved to Saltillo, Coahuila in northern Mexico. After living in Saltillo for a while, he traveled to Ciudad Juárez and attempted to cross the border between ports to reach his ultimate destination of Tampa, Florida, where he has a friend with connections to the rodeo scene. He was apprehended and placed into the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) program. Because of problems accessing his paperwork, he was unable to participate in the MPP wind-down and had been living for eight months in a migrant shelter.

While Yenis would likely not qualify for asylum in the US, his journey to fulfill the dream of being in the rodeo is a reminder that wanting to expand one's horizons, hone life skills and try something new is a migratory experience that should be honored and made possible by legal pathways apart from asylum.



Bunk beds at shelter in Ciudad Juárez.

Recommendations to the Biden Administration and Congress

Root Causes

By following the lead of local organizations in Mexico and Central America working to mitigate the causes of forced migration, Congress and the Biden administration can end the cycle of ineffective and interventionist efforts by the US that have failed to meaningfully improve life in the region or stem outward migration.

Specific Recommendations

- Make climate change mitigation and adaptation a central pillar of development efforts and root causes policy
- Prioritize life development assistance in Central America, especially COVID resilience, direct cash support of poor households and households led by women and access to healthcare and education
- Support efforts by local civil society in Mexico and Central America to hold governments accountable to deliver services to communities, create good job opportunities, and protect human rights
- Support local efforts in Mexico and Central America to improve criminal justice and civil court policies as well as cultural practices that enable domestic and gender-based violence
- Support local efforts in Mexico and Central America to reduce gang violence, create job opportunities for young people, promote alternatives to gang membership and protect those who come forward to report threats
- Supply sufficient COVID-19 vaccine doses to Central American countries to inoculate their entire populations

Legal Pathways

By dramatically expanding safe immigration pathways for people from Central America, Mexico and South America, Congress and the Biden administration can meet high demand from both sides of the border for more immigration pathways. By making the process of accessing legal pathways fast, efficient and accessible, the US government will reduce the demand for irregular migration, reduce the role of organized crime in the migration process, mitigate human suffering and ease stress on border infrastructure.

Specific Recommendations

- Significantly expand work and family reunification visas for people from Central America, Mexico and South America. Ensure that visas are easily accessible, in line with demand and quickly processed
- Create apprenticeship, study and work visa programs specifically for young Central Americans. Partner with private industry to provide opportunities for entrepreneurial visa-holders to access capital to start businesses in countries of origin
- Explore avenues to offer legal immigration status to those fleeing both slow-onset and sudden climate events

Journey through Mexico

By decriminalizing migration and ending agreements with security forces in Mexico and Central America that keep migrants trapped in Mexico through the use of force, the Biden administration and Congress can reduce human suffering along the migration journey and reduce the control criminal organizations have over migration pathways. By acting to limit the flow of illicit firearms south of the border, the US government will limit the ability of criminal organizations to maintain control over large swathes of the Mexican territory and economy.

Specific Recommendations

- End security and policy agreements with governments in Mexico and Central America that aim to deter migration
- End programs and policies that outsource protection responsibilities to Mexico and other third countries
- Redirect security assistance to Mexico towards professionalization of local police and away from militarized public security and migrant deterrence
- Regulate the US arms trade to limit the flow of illicit firearms and weapons south

Access to Asylum

By restoring and expanding the asylum system to honor its founding purpose--offering protection on US territory for those fleeing persecution---Congress and the Biden Administration will ensure that the US government protects the vulnerable, respects its legal obligations and reduces criminal control over migratory journeys. Allowing asylum seekers irrespective of nationality to arrive at a port of entry, state fear and immediately enter a dignified asylum process on US territory will drastically reduce the demand for crossings between ports of entry and ensure that no one seeking protection is turned away.

Specific Recommendations

- End the Title 42 expulsion policy and restore asylum at all ports of entry
- Ensure that asylum seekers are quickly provided a credible fear interview and released from custody to pursue asylum claims from within the US. Provide case management support and free or low-cost access to attorneys to all asylum seekers
- Undertake a comprehensive update of the US asylum system to ensure that eligibility criteria and adjudication match the reality of 21st century asylum-seeking trends
- Expand the asylum system to concretize protections for those fleeing climate displacement, gender-based violence, gang and criminal violence, domestic violence and discrimination based on gender and LGBTQ+ identities
- Eliminate the use of programs like expedited removal and dedicated (“rocket”) dockets that rapidly adjudicate asylum claims without sufficient regard for due process
- Work with the Mexican Government, faith-based and civic organizations to process asylum claims for people who are stuck in limbo in shelters in Ciudad Juárez and other border cities

Endnotes

1 In this report, we use the term “migrant” to describe anyone in the middle of a journey from their region of origin to a new location. Our participants may also be considered prospective asylum seekers or refugees but for the sake of simplicity, we use “migrant” or “internally displaced person.”

2 People in shelters were the most accessible for the purposes of this investigation. However, our participant population is not fully representative given that some migrants may not choose to stay in shelters or are of a nationality that is not subject to the Title 42 expulsion and turnback policy, making them less likely to be forced to stay in Ciudad Juárez.

3 World Bank, *The Gradual Rise and Rapid Decline of the Middle Class in Latin America*, 2021, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/35834>.

4 Insight Crime, *Cárteles Unidos, Mexico*, 25 May 2021, <https://insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/carteles-unidos/>.

5 Our World in Data, “Share of people vaccinated against COVID-19,” 18 October 2021, <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>.

6 USAID, *Fact Sheet #9, Latin America Storms: Situation at a Glance*, 30 December 2020, <https://www.usaid.gov/disaster-assistance/documents/12.30.2020%20-%20USAID-BHA%20Latin%20America%20Storms%20Fact%20Sheet%20%239.pdf>.

7 Unaccompanied children are not subject to the Title 42 expulsion policy.

8 Nicole Sganga and Camilo Montoya-Galvez, CBS News, “Over 2,100 children crossed border alone after being expelled with families to Mexico,” 7 May 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/migrant-children-left-families-asylum-border/>.

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