

After a Lull, the Number of Migrants Trying to Enter the U.S. Has Soared

The number of immigrants arrested at the southwestern border has more than doubled since the spring, fueled by Mexico's economic slump and a Trump administration policy that migrants say works in their favor.



Men who had been returned to Nogales, Mexico, after trying to cross the border. They were part of an increase in the number of migrants trying to cross the southwest border. Credit...Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

NOGALES, Mexico — Illegal migration along the southwest border of the United States has surged after a period of stagnation, as economic hardship, made worse by the pandemic, has driven thousands northward seeking work.

After plunging in the spring, when nations went into lockdown and shut down

borders in an effort to curb the spread of the virus, the number of migrants arrested along the United States border with Mexico more than doubled between April and July, according to the U.S. government.

As the numbers rise, immigration is becoming once again a primary rallying cry for President Trump, who is trailing in the polls in his bid for re-election and looking for purchase with an electorate that is increasingly unhappy with his handling of the pandemic and the economy.

“Despite the dangers posed by Covid-19, illegal immigration — it continues,” Mark Morgan, the acting commissioner of Customs and Border Protection, said on Thursday.

Undocumented migrants were “putting American lives at risk,” he added, although the United States leads the world in the number of deaths from the coronavirus.

Mr. Morgan touted the necessity of continuing to build the border wall, a project central to Mr. Trump’s political identity, to forestall illegal migration and the further spread of the coronavirus by infected undocumented immigrants.

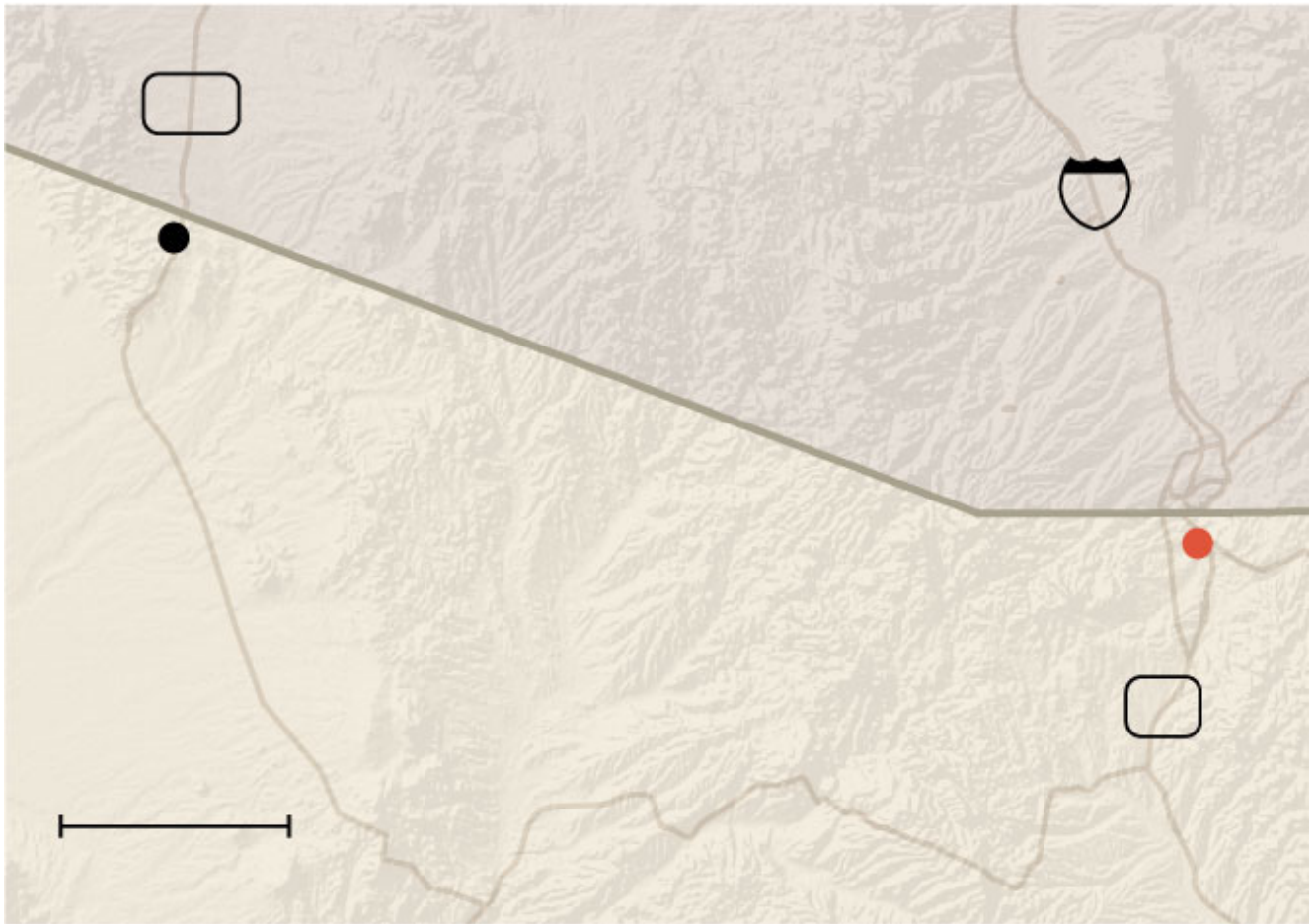


The Mexico side of the border wall in Nogales. In remote areas, far from cities,

the wall becomes a fence, or sometimes no barrier at all.Credit...Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

The numbers are still far below the peak of the migration crisis in 2019, and also far lower than the record highs set in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, when annual tallies of migrants apprehended at the southwest border often topped 1,000,000.

And while undocumented migration is rebounding from a brief lull, who is coming — and why — has changed significantly since the pandemic. Many say they have been inspired to try to migrate now because of a new Trump administration policy that returns them to Mexico quickly, often within hours of being captured, but has the unintended effect of giving them more chances to cross the border illegally.



By the New York Times

During the past several years, Central Americans dominated the flow of migrants trying to cross the southwest border, with many seeking asylum. They often traveled as families, frequently with children, and peacefully surrendered to American border agents in the hope of getting a chance to apply for sanctuary.

Now, many Central Americans who might otherwise have sought to migrate have been discouraged from leaving home by closed borders and other pandemic-related travel restrictions, migrants' advocates said. And word has gotten back to potential refugees fleeing persecution that under the Trump administration's restrictive immigration policies, there is little chance now of securing asylum in the United States.

Instead, the vast majority of those caught trying to cross into the United States in recent months are Mexican, officials and migrants' advocates said. And their encounters with the authorities were often chaotic, with migrants scattering into the desert to evade capture.

"They're running, they're fighting," Mr. Morgan said. "They absolutely have no appreciation for the deadly consequences of their actions while we're navigating a global, deadly pandemic."



Dinora, left, and a friend rested at the San Juan Bosco migrant shelter in Nogales and pondered whether to try to cross again. Credit...Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

Mexico has been among the countries worst affected by the coronavirus pandemic, with nearly 49,000 reported dead — behind only much larger Brazil and the United States. The real number of lives lost is believed to be much higher because of a dearth of testing and a significant undercount of cases.

Millions lost their jobs amid a mounting recession that economists expect to be the deepest in nearly a century, but the government has eschewed the stimulus measures that other nations used to prop up economies as they buckled under the weight of the pandemic.

In July, 78 percent of those apprehended on the southwestern border were from Mexico, mainly single adult men, Mr. Morgan said.

The number of migrants detained along the border with Mexico jumped to 38,347 in July from 16,162 in April, a 137 percent increase, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

That is still a far cry from last year when there were more than 99,000 apprehensions in April of 2019 and nearly 133,000 that May. But the steep rise in recent months reflects a resurgence of the migratory stream.

While migrants and their advocates say that job losses and deepening poverty have been principal drivers of the recent increase from Mexico, a recent Trump administration border policy has also been inspiring migrants to try their luck now.

In March, the administration issued an order that allowed American immigration agents to suspend normal procedures and swiftly expel illegal border crossers, often in a matter of hours, citing the public health need to keep detention centers as empty as possible and prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The new policy also extended to refugees seeking asylum.

For about 91 percent of those arrests in July, the administration used the special rule to rapidly return a migrant to Mexico.



Many migrants who are quickly ushered back into Mexico under the Trump administration's new order stay in border towns such as Nogales before trying again. Credit...Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

Numerous migrants interviewed in this border city in recent days said the policy had been an incentive for them: If they failed in their bid to enter the United States, they said, they would be spared the hardship of detention and would be quickly sent back to Mexico, putting them in position to try again.

“What’s encouraging us now is that because of the pandemic, they are letting us go quickly,” said Jacobo, 27, a carpenter from the Mexican port city of Veracruz who tried, unsuccessfully, to cross the border at Nogales late last month.

He requested partial anonymity to avoid drawing attention from the American and Mexican authorities.

Migrants say that along this stretch of the border, it is easy to find a smuggler to show you the way across. Most crossings occur outside the cities and towns, in remote areas where the towering metal border barrier gives way to low wire fencing, in some places, or nothing at all.

But it is also a fiercely unforgiving environment: Migration routes wend through a vast wilderness desert region in southern Arizona that puts migrants at great risk of dehydration, heatstroke, and starvation. Thousands of travelers have died in recent decades trying to cross.



Newly arrived returnees at the San Juan Bosco migrant shelter in Nogales. Credit...Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

Jacobo, who decided to migrate after the pandemic cost him his job at a construction firm, tried to cross one night late last month in the company of four other migrants, guided by a smuggler who communicated with them by cellphone.

He had already paid about \$450 to the criminal group that controlled the smuggling routes along that stretch of the border and promised to pay another \$6,700 to the smuggler if he successfully made it into the interior of the United States.

Somewhere outside the small Mexican border town of Sásabe, Jacobo and the four others crawled under a low wire fence that demarcated the border. For two days, they trudged north across the Arizona desert, moving mostly at night and during the cooler morning hours, and resting when daytime temperatures became severe.

Late on the second night, they were intercepted by American border agents. The migrants fled. But over the next five hours they were all rounded up, then

marched back to Nogales and handed over to Mexican immigration officials, who processed and released them.

That evening, Jacobo rested at the San Juan Bosco migrant shelter in Nogales, and waited for his brother, an undocumented immigrant living in the United States, to send him money for another attempt. He was going to keep trying until he was successful, he said; giving up would be foolish.

“The possibilities of entering are good,” he said, adding that the quick processing at the border was “in our favor.”



The number of migrants staying at the San Juan Bosco shelter has dwindled. Credit...Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

The shelter's population reflected the recent shifts in the migratory flow. Last year, during the peak of the migration crisis, as many as 200 migrants slept there a night, most hoping to present themselves at the border and apply for asylum, said Gilda Irene Esquer Félix, who runs the shelter.

But since the Trump administration had effectively suspended access to the

asylum program, nearly all of those migrants who had been waiting for an opportunity to cross had left the shelter, returning to their home countries, melting into Mexican society, or trying to find an illegal route across the border.

In recent months, only a handful of migrants have been showing up at the shelter each day, Ms. Esquer said, with most being failed border crossers who needed a place to rest for a night or two after being caught in the United States and sent back to Mexico.

Two Mexican women traveling together were among about a dozen residents there one-night last week. They had met during a failed crossing several weeks ago and had since tried three other times, to no avail.

“Various friends have been successful,” lamented Dinora, 24, who allowed publication of only her first name. She had been compelled to migrate, she said after she lost her job as a seamstress in a factory in her home state of Campeche on the Gulf of Mexico.

She had heard that the Americans were not detaining people, making it much easier to try again. But after four failed crossings, and the duress of trying to cross the desert, she had decided to head back home.

“No more,” she said.

Her friend, however, was determined to try again.

Zolan Kanno-Youngs contributed reporting from Washington, D.C.



After four failed attempts, Dinora is done trying to cross the border. Credit...Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

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