

U.S.-Mexico border crossings continue to rise, with 50,000 arrests made amid pandemic restrictions

Apprehensions of unauthorized migrants along the southern border rose for a fourth consecutive month in August, with U.S. immigration authorities making nearly 50,000 arrests and expelling the majority of those apprehended under pandemic-era restrictions.

More than 43,000 of the apprehensions last month turned into summary expulsions, which U.S. border authorities have been authorized to make during the coronavirus pandemic, according to Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data released Friday. More expulsions were made in August than in any other month since the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued an order in mid-March green-lighting them.

The arrests recorded by CBP — the main metric used to gauge border crossings — shows that unauthorized migration to the U.S. continued to increase in the summer, despite the ongoing pandemic and the Trump administration's policy of swiftly expelling most migrants, including asylum-seekers and unaccompanied children, without allowing them to seek humanitarian refuge.

Apprehensions along the U.S.-Mexico border have been increasing since April, when they plummeted to 17,000. But they continue to be substantially less than the number of arrests CBP made during the same time period last year, when hundreds of thousands of families with minors and unaccompanied children journeyed north from Central America.

Most migrants apprehended in August were single adults. Unaccompanied children and members of families accounted for 3,088 and 2,693 arrests, respectively. During a press conference Friday in Laredo, Texas, President Trump's top official at CBP, Mark Morgan, said "the majority" of unaccompanied children processed by his agency last month were expelled under the emergency coronavirus policy.

Morgan, the senior official performing the duties of the CBP commissioner, praised the CDC directive, which the administration says is designed to prevent potentially infected migrants from spreading the coronavirus inside border holding cells and the broader U.S. population. He said the arrest figures are becoming “less relevant” because most migrants are being turned back rapidly under the public health order, many of them within two hours of being encountered.

Immigration

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While the figures released Friday show that unauthorized border crossings are increasing, they are not representative of the exact number of migrants apprehended, as some are processed and expelled more than once. Morgan said CBP has recorded a high recidivism rate of border crossings among single adults, particularly Mexican nationals. He repeatedly faulted migrants for journeying to the U.S. southern border during a global pandemic — which he said places them and CBP officials at risk of contracting the coronavirus.

Human rights groups and immigrant advocates have harshly criticized the CDC order, which they say weaponizes public health to achieve the long-sought Trump administration objective of walling off the asylum system for border crossers, whom officials say are chiefly economic migrants who are not eligible for humanitarian protection.

The use of the CDC order to expel migrant children, who are held in hotels before being sent to their home countries through deportation flights, has alarmed advocates the most. U.S. law protects unaccompanied children from rapid removals and requires border officials to transfer most of them to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, which oversees a network of shelters and housing facilities for minors.

But Morgan said migrant minors can also pose a public health risk.

“A child, as everyone well knows, can carry COVID just as much as an adult. So, the issue is we want to prevent them from being introduced into our congregate settings and being further introduced into the country,” Morgan said, adding later, “We’re trying to do everything we can to expeditiously remove them as well.”

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