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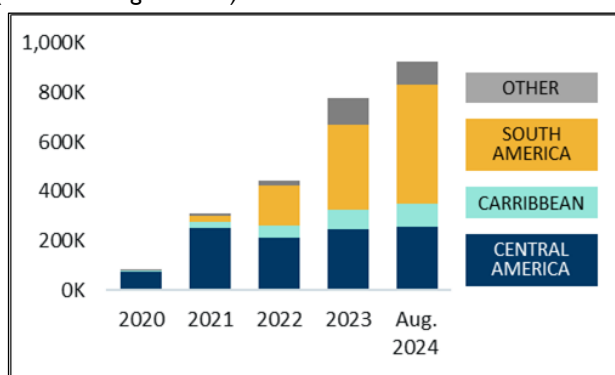
# Mexico's Migration Control Efforts

## Background

In FY2022 and FY2023, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reported record numbers of migrant encounters on the Southwest border, raising congressional concerns. In June 2024, a new U.S. policy limiting access to asylum, combined with Mexican enforcement efforts, contributed to a decline in encounters. In FY2024, encounters totaled 2.1 million, down from 2.5 million the year before. Mexican nationals comprised roughly 35% of CBP encounters in FY2024. Former Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018-2024) worked with the Trump and Biden Administrations on migration management. President Claudia Sheinbaum reportedly is developing plans to respond to changes in U.S. policies that President-elect Trump has pledged to make.

Increases in U.S.-bound migration through Mexico arguably revealed gaps in Mexican government capacity to manage migration and placed migrants at greater risk of harm. Historically, migrants entering Mexico emigrated mostly from the Northern Triangle countries of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of migrants entering Mexico from regions beyond Central America has increased. In 2023 and through August 2024, Mexican authorities apprehended more migrants from South America (primarily from Venezuela) than from Central America (see **Figure 1**).

**Figure 1. Reported Apprehensions of Migrants by Mexican Authorities by Region of Origin**  
(CY2020- August 2024)



**Source:** Graph by CRS, based on information from Mexico's Secretary of the Interior.

## Mexico's Immigration Control Policies

Since 2014, with financial and technical support from the United States, Mexico has established naval bases on its rivers, security cordons north of its borders with Guatemala and Belize, and drone surveillance in border regions. Unarmed agents from Mexico's National Migration Institute (INM) have increased migrant interdiction

operations along train routes and at bus stations, improved infrastructure at border crossings, and set up mobile highway checkpoints. The agency conducts biometric screening of migrants at detention centers using equipment supplied by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). INM also has sought to professionalize its workforce and to improve coordination with federal, state, and local security forces. Despite reform efforts, corruption and weak observance of migrant protections by some INM personnel have led to abuse of migrants. In March 2023, 39 migrants died when INM officials did not unlock a detention center after a fire broke out.

Former President López Obrador took office pledging to adopt a humanitarian approach to migration and to promote development in Central America as a solution to unauthorized migration. His government's record in these areas was mixed. For example, Mexico's Commission for the Aid of Refugees (COMAR) increased its capacity to process migrants by over 500% since 2017 with support from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). At the same time, analysts found limited impacts of Mexico's part of *Sembrando Oportunidades* (Sowing Opportunities), a U.S.-Mexico program to address the root causes of irregular migration from the Northern Triangle.

From 2019 through the end of his term, López Obrador took a harder line than his predecessors toward migration, in part due to pressure from both the Trump and Biden Administrations. His government increased migrant apprehensions and restricted access to humanitarian visas, particularly for those traveling in large groups. As during prior enforcement surges, migrants have taken more dangerous routes and increased their reliance on smugglers. After Mexico deployed its National Guard (formed in 2019) for migration enforcement, reports by human rights groups of mistreatment of migrants rose. Since 2021, Mexico reportedly has sought to keep asylum seekers in southern Mexico despite dangerous conditions there, often busing migrants from northern to southern Mexico. The Mexican government also created visa requirements for those from countries such as Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela.

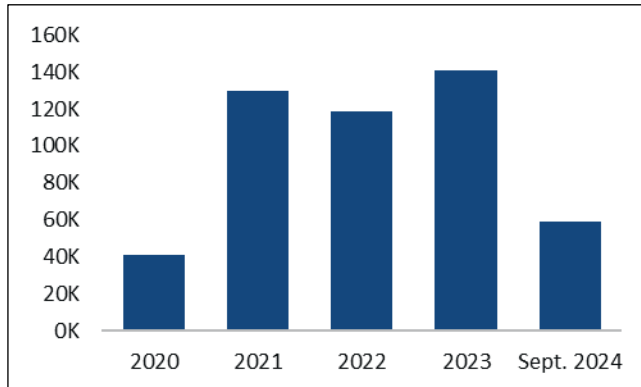
Since taking office in October, President Sheinbaum has continued to implement her predecessor's enforcement policies.

## Humanitarian Protection in Mexico

Mexico has a broader definition of *refugee* than the United States and the 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention; Mexico recognizes a right to asylum based on "generalized violence; foreign aggression; internal conflicts; massive violations of human rights; and other circumstances leading to a serious disturbance of public order."

Asylum requests more than tripled in Mexico from 2020 to 2023 (**Figure 2**). With support from UNHCR, COMAR registered 140,000 asylum applications in 2023, with most asylum seekers coming from Haiti, Honduras, Cuba, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Afghanistan is the only country outside the Western Hemisphere in the top 10 countries of origin for asylum applicants. In 2023, more than 80% of applicants from Honduras and El Salvador received asylum in Mexico; 13% of Haitians were approved.

**Figure 2. Asylum Applications in Mexico: CY2020 Through September 2024**



**Source:** CRS, based on data from Mexico's Commission for the Aid of Refugees (COMAR).

## U.S. Policy

The Biden Administration initially halted some of the Trump Administration's restrictive border policies. In October 2021, the Biden Administration ended the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) policy requiring most asylum seekers who arrive at the border to remain in Mexico during the adjudication of their applications. However, CBP continued to enforce pandemic-related asylum restrictions under the Public Health Service Act (Title 42 of the *U.S. Code*) until May 2023. During that period, Mexico accepted U.S. expulsions from an expanded number of nationalities. According to CBP data, the United States made 2.9 million expulsions to Mexico under Title 42 from March 2020 to May 2023. As noted above, the Biden Administration limited access to asylum in June 2024 after encounters had risen to record high numbers.

### Migrant Protection Protocols

In January 2019, DHS implemented the MPP (also known commonly as *Remain in Mexico*) policy under Section 235(b)(2)(C) of the Immigration and Nationality Act. The MPP allowed DHS to return to Mexico non-Mexican inadmissible aliens (excluding unaccompanied children) entering or seeking admission at the U.S.-Mexico land border. DHS placed these individuals in formal removal proceedings and required them to wait in Mexico for the duration of their proceedings in immigration court. The Trump Administration returned roughly 71,000 MPP enrollees to Mexico to await processing. Of completed MPP cases, less than 1% were granted asylum or another form of protection in the United States.

The Mexican government announced it would offer basic services and jobs to those affected by MPP but struggled due to budget constraints. From January 2019 to January 2021, Mexican border cities received limited support from the

federal government even as the number of migrants in Mexico increased. The lack of support left migrants more vulnerable to exploitation and violent crime.

President-elect Trump has pledged to increase removals (deportations), restart the MPP, and impose a 25% tariff on goods from Mexico to remain in place until the Mexican government stops irregular U.S.-bound migration and drug trafficking. The Mexican government reportedly has increased staffing at its U.S. consulates to assist migrants who may be at risk of removal. The Sheinbaum government has vowed to bolster Mexico's capacity to receive and reintegrate Mexican deportees and discussed Mexican enforcement efforts with President-elect Trump. It is unclear whether, and under what conditions, Mexico would agree to the MPP being restarted.

## Anti-Smuggling Efforts

In October 2021, Mexico and the United States entered into the U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities. The framework facilitates cooperation to secure borders and ports of entry as well as efforts to combat cross-border crimes, including migrant smuggling and human trafficking. U.S. agencies have increased U.S. investigations and prosecutions of human smugglers, expanded a unit with Mexican prosecutors targeting migrant smuggling, and sanctioned criminal groups involved in human smuggling.

## Foreign Assistance

From FY2015 to FY2023, the State Department provided more than \$176.6 million in International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) funding to support Mexico's immigration control efforts. U.S. funds enabled the provision of nonintrusive inspection equipment, mobile kiosks, canine teams, and vehicles, as well as training for more than 1,000 officials. U.S. assistance helped Mexican agencies build a more secure communications network in Mexico's southern border area and install biometric screening equipment in Mexico's 52 migrant detention centers that interfaces with U.S. databases.

From FY2018 through FY2023, the State Department has provided more than \$163 million through the Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) account to UNHCR to improve access to asylum in Mexico, provide legal assistance and shelter for asylum seekers, and increase COMAR's asylum processing capacity. MRA funds also have supported other humanitarian organizations in Mexico involved in improving shelters, providing medical aid, and transporting migrants who agree to be sent back to their home countries.

## Congressional Considerations

Congress may influence U.S.-Mexico migration cooperation through legislation, including appropriations, and oversight. H.R. 2, passed by the House in May 2023, would direct the Secretary of State to seek to reestablish an agreement similar to the MPP with Mexico. The House-passed version of the FY2025 State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPs) measure, H.R. 8771, would cut global MRA funding. In contrast, the Senate-reported version, S. 4797, would increase global MRA funds. Congress could consider expanding, restricting, or placing

conditions or reporting requirements on U.S. migration assistance to Mexico.

**Clare Ribando Seelke**, Specialist in Latin American Affairs

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