

Migration Dynamics and Conditions at the U.S.-Mexico Border February 2026



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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, millions of people have arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border—with some attempting to irregularly enter the country and others seeking asylum at or between ports of entry. The United States' policy approach toward migrants who try to cross without detection has largely remained the same. This approach focuses on identifying, detaining, and removing these individuals. However, U.S. authorities have enacted a range of different policy responses for asylum seekers claiming protection at ports of entry. In recent years, these responses have included channeling asylum seekers into specific legal pathways, the establishment of physical and digital queuing systems, and the partial or complete blocking of their access to the U.S. immigration system. During each shift, asylum-seeking migrants have reacted in varying ways, such as by creating asylum waitlists or encampments along the border.

On January 20, 2025, President Donald Trump assumed office for a second term and enacted the most recent change to the asylum processing system at the U.S.-Mexico border. On that date, the president halted all asylum processing, including both at and between ports of entry. This shift left hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers in limbo across Mexico, without any path to make an asylum claim in the United States. Theoretically, unaccompanied minors are still able to seek asylum at ports of entry along the U.S.-Mexico border.¹ However, from March 2025 through January 2026, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data shows that CBP officers processed only 65 non-Mexican unaccompanied minors at these ports of entry.²

Simultaneously, in Mexico, the Mexican federal government has continued its high levels of immigration enforcement at the country's borders and throughout the interior. Specifically, it has expanded the number of migration-focused checkpoints on highways heading north, deployed more soldiers and National Guard (*Guardia Nacional*) members to the U.S.-Mexico border, and bused apprehended non-Mexican migrants to cities in southern Mexico. The Trump administration's elimination of foreign assistance has also impacted Mexican civil society organizations that work with migrant populations, with some shelters struggling to provide food, other basic resources, or even keep their doors open.

Since January 2025, the number of migrants waiting at the U.S.-Mexico border has dropped dramatically. This report estimates that approximately 5,260 individuals remain in Mexican border cities. These individuals are concentrated in Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, and Mexicali, with these three cities hosting roughly 77 percent of the border's estimated migrant population. We approximate this figure to be the lowest number of migrants in Mexican border cities since 2018 or 2019.

These migrants are also less visible than in the past. Many people have moved out of shelters and into rented rooms and apartments, and there are no longer any tent encampments along the border. Non-Mexican migrants are often seeking to obtain refugee status—or another legal status—in Mexico, in order to work and travel freely throughout the country. However, due to higher numbers of applications and reduced international support, the country's refugee processing agency has been taking up to two years to process applications.³

This February 2026 migration dynamics and conditions update focuses on current U.S. asylum restrictions at ports of entry and migrants' experiences in Mexican border cities. It draws on phone and WhatsApp interviews with Mexican government officials and members of civil society organizations on both sides of the border from February 16, 2026 through February 20, 2026. It also relies on local news articles to fill in any gaps.

ASYLUM PROCESSING PHASES

Over the past seven and a half years, CBP has passed through seven different asylum processing phases at ports of entry. These phases have alternated between allowing asylum seekers to make protection claims at ports of entry and either partially or fully blocking asylum processing. See Figure 1 for a breakdown of each phase.

**Figure 1: Asylum Processing Phases at Ports of Entry Along the U.S.-Mexico Border
(June 2018 - February 2026)**

Phase	Time Period	Phase Name	CBP Processed Asylum Seekers at Port of Entry	Methods to Access Port of Entry	Asylum Seekers Processed by Date of Arrival at Border
1	June 2018 - March 2020	Metering	Yes	Waitlist and lines at port of entry	Yes ⁴
2	March 2020 - April 2022	Title 42	No	N/A	N/A
3	Summer 2021 & April 2022 - January 2023	Title 42 Exemptions	Only vulnerable individuals	Waitlist	Varied by organizing entity
4	January 2023 - May 2023	CBP One and Title 42	Yes ⁵	CBP One Appointment	No
5	May 2023 - June 2024	CBP One and Walk Ups	Yes	CBP One Appointment Waitlist and lines at port of entry	No Varied by organizing entity
6	June 2024 - January 2025	CBP One and June 2024 Emergency Declaration	Yes	CBP One Appointment	No
7	January 2025 - Present	Executive Order Against Invasion	No	N/A	N/A

Authors' elaboration

Beginning in June 2018, CBP launched its first attempt to restrict asylum seekers' access to ports of entry. During this first phase, CBP officers initiated a process that came to be known as "metering." As part of metering, port officials informed arriving asylum seekers that U.S. ports of entry were full and only accepted a specified number of individuals per port of entry each day. In response, migrants waited in physical lines in front of the ports of entry and later relied on self- or externally-run waitlists in Mexican border cities, which acted as proxy lines for asylum seekers to then begin the asylum claim process with U.S. authorities.

In March 2020, as Covid-19 began to spread across the United States, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) issued a public health regulation for Covid-19—referred to as Title 42 authority—that eliminated all asylum processing at ports of entry. This second processing phase resulted in the suspension of asylum waitlists in Mexican border cities and migrants were stuck in limbo at the U.S.-Mexico border. The following year, in 2021, CBP created various temporary Title 42 exemption programs, which then became permanent in April 2022. These exemption programs constituted the third processing phase, whereby CBP officers allowed certain migrants—who were deemed to be particularly vulnerable—to cross at ports of entry and seek asylum.

In January 2023, CBP launched a new model of asylum processing: the "CBP One" mobile application. At this time, Title 42 remained active but CBP required that asylum seekers use the mobile application to request an appointment at a U.S. port of entry, leading to the fourth processing phase. Individuals located in Mexico could submit certain information on the CBP One application—including biographical and demographic details, travel history, and their sponsor information—and request a processing appointment at one of the participating ports of entry along the U.S.-Mexico border.

In May 2023, the Covid-19 era Title 42 public health order expired, and CBP began its fifth processing phase. During this phase, CBP processed 1,450 asylum seekers a day through the CBP One application and also accepted small numbers of individuals without CBP One appointments at ports of entry, who were referred to as "walk ups." At the same time, the Biden administration put forward a final rule titled "Circumvention of Lawful Pathways," which banned access to asylum for non-Mexicans who crossed the border in between ports of entry or as walk ups.⁶ This meant that CBP officials continued to process walk ups, but any non-Mexican individual who entered the United States as a "walk up" was then subsequently ineligible to apply for asylum once in U.S. territory.

In June 2024, CBP entered its sixth asylum processing phase. At this time, the Biden administration issued a presidential proclamation and an interim final rule titled "Securing the Border."⁷ This policy change allowed officials to restrict access to asylum during "emergency" conditions, which it defined as periods when the Border Patrol's daily apprehensions surpassed an average of 2,500 encounters per day over a seven day period.⁸ That month, the Biden administration began applying the emergency restrictions at the border, and suspended walk up processing. Notably, during this phase, CBP officers continued to process 1,450 CBP One appointments each day across eight border cities.

Finally, on January 20, 2025, President Trump assumed office for his second term and immediately halted asylum processing along the border. In a series of changes, the new administration launched the seventh asylum processing phase by shutting down the CBP One application and notifying asylum seekers that all scheduled appointments were cancelled. Later that day, the Trump administration issued the "Guaranteeing the States Protection Against Invasion," executive order, which declared an invasion at the U.S.-Mexico border and barred

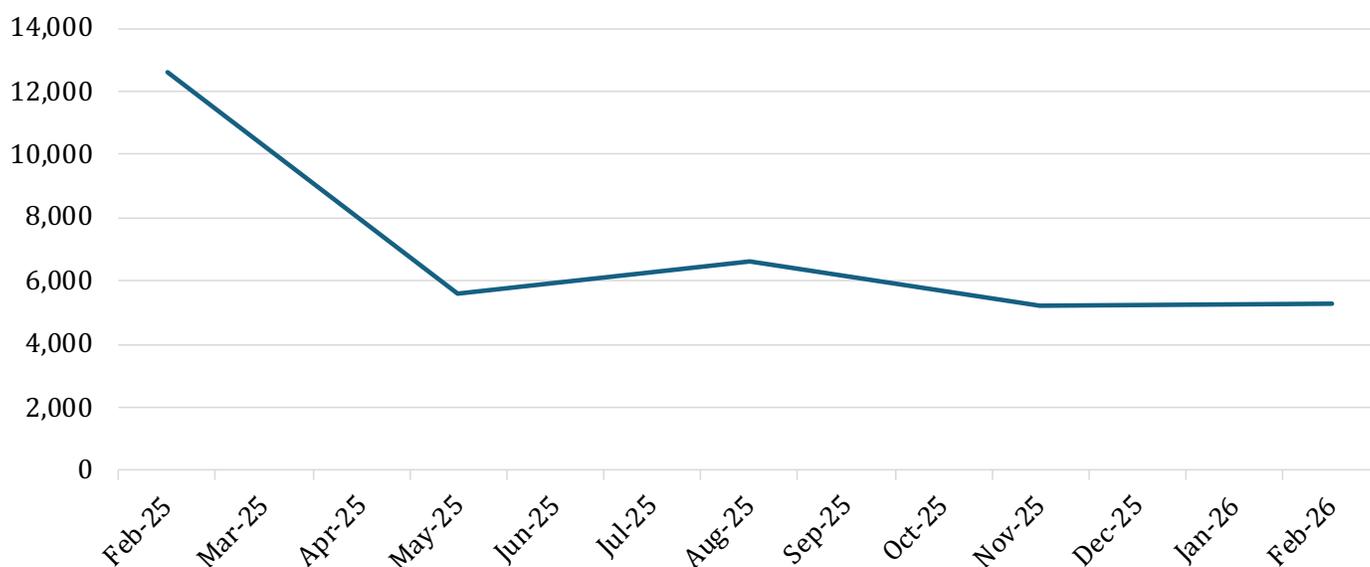
asylum seekers from both entering the United States and accessing the U.S. immigration system.⁹

The Trump administration also called for additional programs to send asylum seekers to Mexico and other countries. Specifically, the January 20, 2025 “Securing Our Borders” executive order stated an interest in resurrecting the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP)—which sends asylum seekers to Mexico while their cases move through the U.S. court system—and establishing agreements with various countries to send them arriving asylum seekers.¹⁰ In recent months, the U.S. government has taken steps to re-implement MPP, and signed both asylum cooperative agreements and repatriation agreements with a range of countries to accept third-country individuals (i.e. citizens other than their own).¹¹

CONDITIONS ACROSS MEXICO AND ALONG THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

Since the Trump administration assumed office and halted asylum processing, the conditions for migrants along the border have changed significantly. In January 2025, the administration cancelled approximately 30,000 scheduled CBP One appointments and closed the pathway for an estimated 200,000 to 270,000 asylum seekers in Mexico who were actively seeking those appointments.¹² Many of these individuals left Mexican border cities, with some traveling to larger interior cities—such as Monterrey, Guadalajara, and Mexico City—returning to their communities or countries of origin, or crossing into the United States as clandestine migrants. However, as of February 2026, an estimated 5,260 migrants continue to live in Mexican border cities.

Figure 2: Migrants Living in Mexican Border Cities (February 2025 to February 2026)

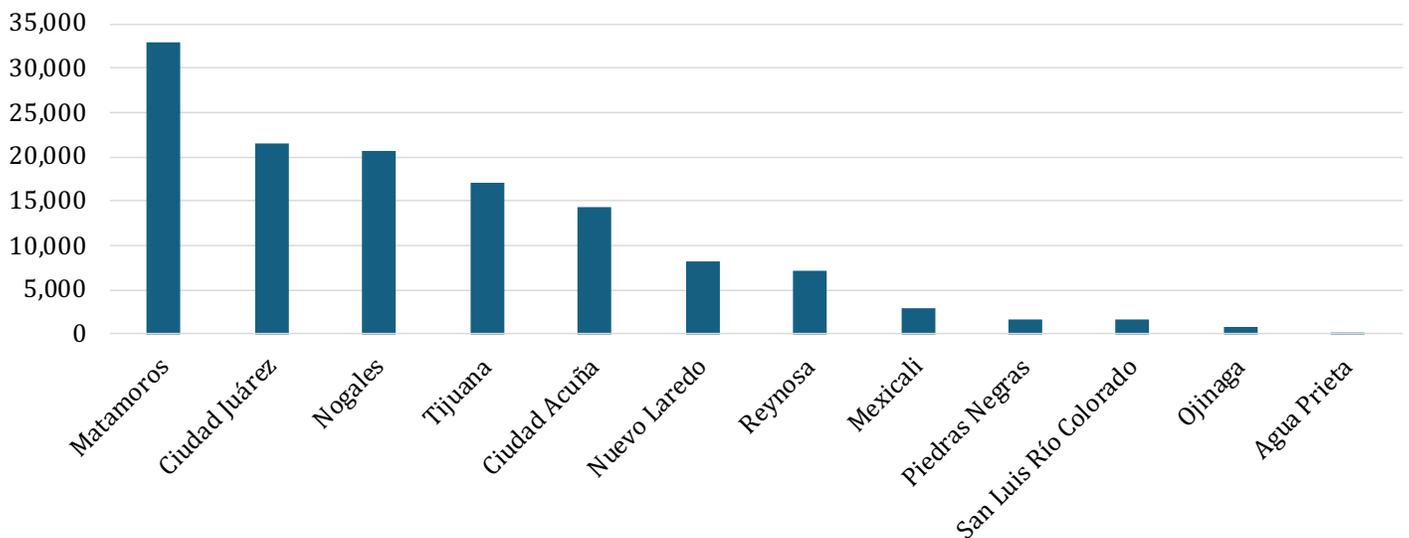


Authors' elaboration

As a result of U.S. policy changes and shifts in migrant flows into the interior of the country, Mexico has also stepped up its own enforcement efforts. Toward the end of the Biden administration, Mexico’s National Migration Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Migración, INM*) began apprehending more migrants and busing those individuals to cities in southern Mexico.¹³ This has continued into the Trump administration, with INM and Mexico’s National Guard erecting more checkpoints on north-bound highways. While the number of migrants has decreased along the U.S.-Mexico border, thousands of migrants continue to live in Mexico City’s streets and rented spaces.¹⁴ Some of these individuals are attempting to return to their countries of origin, others are looking to remain in Mexico, and still others are undecided about their future plans.

In response to the Trump administration’s promise to increase deportations, Mexico also launched the program “Mexico Hugs You” (*“Mexico Te Abraza”*) to receive deported Mexicans. As part of the program, Mexican authorities constructed reception centers to assist recently deported individuals with legal documents, information about social programs, clothes, and other basic supplies. Buses from these centers also transport these individuals into the country’s interior. Yet, over the past few months, Mexican officials have dismantled several of these reception centers, given that fewer Mexican nationals have been deported by land than initially anticipated. U.S. authorities also fly Mexican migrants to the country’s interior, including to the southern border cities of Tapachula, Chiapas and Villahermosa, Tabasco.¹⁵ From the start of the Trump administration through December 2025, U.S. authorities deported nearly 160,200 Mexican citizens to Mexico.¹⁶

Figure 3: U.S. Land Deportations of Mexican Citizens by Border City (January 2025 to December 2025)



Source: Mexican Government Data¹⁷

Additionally, according to Mexico’s own data, between January 20, 2025 and December 31, 2025, the Trump administration has also sent at least 12,983 non-Mexican individuals to Mexico.¹⁸ This includes third-country nationals who previously had a temporary or permanent legal status in Mexico and individuals without any status. The majority of these third-country nationals appear to be from Cuba, Venezuela, Guatemala, and Honduras, and they include nearly 700 minors. The vast majority of these third-country nationals are bused immediately to Villahermosa, Tabasco.

The situation on the ground in Mexico for migrants continues to be challenging. Migrants face unstable living conditions and security risks throughout the country. Individuals living in Mexican cities without legal status are often unable to formally work, access medical care, or obtain adequate housing.¹⁹ Further, even when migrants obtain employment, the salaries are often so low that they cannot obtain a basic standard of living. Civil society organizations have also detailed widespread violence against migrants, both in southern Mexico and in cities along the U.S.-Mexico border.²⁰ Certain groups of migrants continue to experience additional challenges, with Black, LGBTQ+, Indigenous, and non-Spanish speaking migrants often facing targeted discrimination.

Civil society organizations have long supported Mexico’s migrant population, including by providing legal and social services for waiting asylum seekers, people in transit, and deportees. However, the Trump administration’s actions—particularly dismantling the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and halting foreign aid in January 2025—have left many of these organizations with limited funding. In addition to foreign aid cuts, shelters along the border also report fewer individual donations, which is disproportionately affecting small, local shelters that provide migrants with food, housing, and basic services.²¹ In recent months, as the number of migrants has decreased, international and local organizations have also closed some operations in Mexican border cities. The following sections of this report detail the current conditions for migrants in ten Mexican border cities.

CONDITIONS AT THE BORDER: FEBRUARY 2026

Mexican City	# of People Estimated in City	City Conditions
<p>Matamoros, Tamaulipas</p>	<p>~300 people <i>February 20, 2026</i></p>	<p>As of February 2026, there were approximately 300 to 400 migrants living in Matamoros.²² Fewer than 100 migrants remain in the city’s shelters, and the other individuals live in rented apartments and rooms.²³ Local civil society organizations report that a small number of migrants continue to both arrive in and leave the city. The majority of the migrants are from Honduras, Venezuela, Cuba, and Haiti.</p> <p>The migrants residing in Matamoros have generally attempted to regularize their migratory status in the city. They have frequently found work and enrolled their children in school. Many are hoping that the United States will eventually change their immigration policy, and they will be able to cross the border to seek asylum.</p> <p>In January 2026, U.S. officials began installing buoys in the Rio Grande between Brownsville and Matamoros.²⁴ These buoys resemble a continuous long orange tube, rather than the separate buoys between Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras.</p>

Conditions at the Border: February 2026 (continued)

Mexican City	# of People Estimated in City	City Conditions
<p>Matamoros, Tamaulipas <i>(continued)</i></p>		<p>U.S. authorities have increased their deportations of Mexican citizens to Matamoros. The city is now receiving between 170 and 200 Mexican nationals per day. Civil society organizations also report that some non-Mexican migrants have self-deported from the United States and arrived in Matamoros.</p>
<p>Reynosa, Tamaulipas</p>	<p>~600 people <i>February 17, 2026</i></p>	<p>Currently, there are an estimated 600 to 900 migrants in Reynosa. The city’s shelters remain relatively empty. The Senda de Vida shelters are housing approximately 70 migrants. The migrants living in these shelters are recently arrived families.</p> <p>Most of the migrants in Reynosa are living in apartments or rented rooms. They are well established in the city with stable employment, and are generally seeking to regularize their status in Mexico. Overall, the vast majority of the migrants in Reynosa are from Honduras, Guatemala, Venezuela, Cuba, Haiti, and Nicaragua.</p> <p>Local organizations report that some migrants continue to arrive in Reynosa. However, these individuals are often attempting to cross into the United States between ports of entry. They are not generally passing through the city’s migrant shelters.</p> <p>U.S. authorities continue to deport people to Reynosa. However, most deportees arriving in the city are non-Mexican citizens. These deportations include 70 to 90 third-country nationals per week, and around five Mexican nationals per week. INM generally buses third-country nationals directly to southern Mexico, but some have been released directly into Reynosa—including people from Cuba, Cameroon, and Pakistan. The released individuals generally had some form of permanent or temporary status in Mexico before crossing into the United States.</p> <p>In January 2026, Mexican officials dismantled the city’s federal shelter for receiving deported Mexican citizens, given the low deportation numbers.²⁵</p>

Conditions at the Border: February 2026 (continued)

Mexican City	# of People Estimated in City	City Conditions
<p>Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas</p>	<p>~25 people <i>February 20, 2026</i></p>	<p>Currently, there are an estimated 25 migrants in Nuevo Laredo. There are currently no migrant shelters operating in the city.</p> <p>Most migrants are residing in hotels, apartments, or rented rooms. Most migrants in the city are attempting to irregularly cross into the United States between ports of entry.²⁶</p> <p>On February 19, 2026, the U.S. government announced that it was installing buoys in the river between Nuevo Laredo and Laredo.²⁷ These buoys are similar to those recently erected near Brownsville.</p> <p>U.S. authorities continue to deport people to Nuevo Laredo, but the numbers have significantly decreased. Through 2025, Mexico reported more than 8,200 deportations of Mexicans through the city (averaging 22 people per day).²⁸ However, from January 1, 2026 through January 28, 2026, the city received only 65 deported individuals (approximately two people per day).²⁹ Given the low number of deportations, Mexican officials dismantled the city’s federal shelter for receiving deported Mexican citizens.³⁰</p>
<p>Piedras Negras, Coahuila</p>	<p>~150 people <i>February 16, 2026</i></p>	<p>Currently, there are an estimated 150 migrants in Piedras Negras. Local organizations reported that there are approximately 70 migrants in the city’s shelters.³¹ The remaining migrants live in apartments or rented rooms. Most of the migrants are from Honduras, Venezuela, Ecuador, Cuba, and Mexico.</p> <p>Some of the individuals arriving in Piedras Negras were recently deported from the United States. These individuals often have families in the United States, and are reportedly seeking to cross the border between ports of entry. Other individuals arrive in the city to look for work or to seek opportunities to regularize their status in Mexico.</p> <p>U.S. authorities deport very few migrants to Piedras Negras. Throughout 2025, Mexican government data shows only 1,633 Mexican national deportations or an average of four to five individuals per day.³² Local organizations report that there have been a few cases of Cuban nationals deported through Piedras Negras in recent months.</p>

Conditions at the Border: February 2026 (continued)

Mexican City	# of People Estimated in City	City Conditions
<p>Piedras Negras, Coahuila <i>(continued)</i></p>		<p>U.S. authorities generally deport people through nearby Ciudad Acuña. These migrants are immediately taken to Rosita, Coahuila, before being bused into the Mexican interior. During 2025, U.S. authorities deported more than 14,000 people (averaging nearly 40 people per day) through Ciudad Acuña.³³</p>
<p>Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua</p>	<p>~1,250 people <i>February 20, 2026</i></p>	<p>There are an estimated 1,250 to 1,500 migrants living in Ciudad Juárez.³⁴ This includes just under 450 people in different shelters across the city, and an estimated 800 to 1,050 migrants living in other accommodations. The largest number of migrants are Mexican citizens, followed by individuals from Venezuela, Honduras, Ecuador, Colombia, and Guatemala.³⁵</p> <p>The individuals who remain in Ciudad Juárez are generally not looking to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. Instead, they are seeking ways to stay in Mexico, regularize their status, and find stable employment.</p> <p>U.S. authorities continue to deport people to Ciudad Juárez. During 2025, these authorities deported 21,483 Mexican nationals through the city (averaging 59 people per day). In December 2025, U.S. authorities sent even more deportees through Ciudad Juárez, averaging 128 individuals a day.³⁶ However, in January 2026, the federal shelter that receives deported Mexican citizens cited lower than initially expected deportation numbers and dismantled two thirds of its tents.³⁷</p>
<p>Agua Prieta, Sonora</p>	<p>~25 people <i>February 19, 2026</i></p>	<p>There are an estimated 25 migrants (five families and an individual) living in Agua Prieta. These individuals are mostly Mexican citizens who have been in the city since before the Trump administration shut down the CBP One application. Although, a small number of migrants recently arrived in Agua Prieta with the intention of making a life in the city. The shelter is currently housing 13 migrants from Mexico, El Salvador, and Cuba.</p> <p>There have been small numbers of migrants arriving in Agua Prieta in recent months. These individuals are almost exclusively displaced Mexican citizens, who are seeking to cross the U.S.-Mexico border between ports of entry. Organized crime groups control Agua Prieta and the surrounding migration routes. Migrants in the city tend to use other nearby crossing points to enter the United States.</p>

Conditions at the Border: February 2026 (continued)

Mexican City	# of People Estimated in City	City Conditions
Agua Prieta, Sonora <i>(continued)</i>		<p>Agua Prieta’s port of entry is not one of the United States’ designated deportation sites. The city only received a total of 114 deportations in 2025. Most land-based deportations to Sonora occur through Nogales.</p>
Nogales, Sonora	<p>~100 people</p> <p><i>February 20, 2026</i></p>	<p>In Nogales, there are an estimated 100 migrants in the city. Currently, some non-Mexican migrants in Nogales are seeking to regularize their status in Mexico, including by applying for refugee status. These individuals often face challenges with their applications and have been waiting for longer than the legal time limits. The Kino Border Initiative has been supporting individuals to apply for refugee status, but, to date, all of the migrants they have worked with have been unable to even obtain a humanitarian card (<i>tarjeta humanitaria</i>). This card allows refugee-status applicants to legally work in Mexico and access healthcare and education.</p> <p>In 2025, Nogales received just over 20,000 deportations of Mexican nationals through the city (averaging 56 people per day).³⁸ U.S. authorities continue to deport people to Nogales. Currently, Mexico’s government-run shelter reports an average of 41 Mexican nationals arriving each day.</p>
San Luis Río Colorado, Sonora	<p>10 people</p> <p><i>February 20, 2026</i></p>	<p>There are no longer any asylum-seeking migrants waiting in the shelter in San Luis Río Colorado. In recent days, the shelter reports hosting between two and 13 migrants at a time.</p> <p>Some migrants are also reaching the city to cross irregularly into the United States. This includes some recently deported Mexican citizens who are attempting to re-enter the United States.</p> <p>U.S. authorities continue to deport low numbers of Mexican citizens to San Luis Río Colorado. In 2025, these deportations totaled 1,573 people (averaging about four people per day). In January 2026, city authorities closed the federal shelter that was receiving deported Mexican citizens, given the low numbers of people being returned to the city.³⁹</p>

Conditions at the Border: February 2026 (continued)

Mexican City	# of People Estimated in City	City Conditions
<p>Mexicali, Baja California</p>	<p>~800 people <i>February 19, 2026</i></p>	<p>There are an estimated 800 migrants in Mexicali. Local organizations estimate that about 400 migrants are currently residing in shelters and another 400 migrants are renting rooms or living on the streets.</p> <p>The vast majority of these individuals are from Mexico, especially from the states of Michoacán, Sinaloa, and Guerrero. Some Mexicans are attempting to cross irregularly near Mexicali, while others come to find work and stability in the city.</p> <p>There are relatively few deportations through Mexicali, with most occurring through Tijuana. During 2025, Mexican government data registered about 2,900 deportations (approximately eight people per day) in Mexicali.⁴⁰ Many migrants deported through Mexicali are bused to the Mexican interior. However, since August 2025, the Peregrino shelter has also received small numbers of deportees. These individuals are primarily from Mexico, but there have been several cases of individuals from Cuba.</p>
<p>Tijuana, Baja California</p>	<p>~2,000 people <i>February 20, 2026</i></p>	<p>In Tijuana, there are currently an estimated 2,000 migrants living in the city. This includes approximately 1,000 migrants residing in the city’s shelters. The remaining 1,000 migrants are renting apartments or rooms, staying in motels, or living on the streets.</p> <p>The vast majority of the migrants in Tijuana are Mexican citizens, from the states of Michoacán, Guerrero, Sinaloa, and Chiapas. There are also individuals from Haiti and Central America who have been in Tijuana for an extended period of time and are attempting to regularize their status. Local organizations note an uptick in the number of African migrants requesting asylum in Tijuana.</p> <p>Local organizations also report an increase in the number of deported Mexicans arriving in the city. These individuals often travel to Tijuana to look for work or to attempt to cross back into the United States between ports of entry.</p> <p>U.S. authorities continue to deport migrants to Tijuana. During 2025, Mexican government data registered more than 17,000 deportations of Mexican citizens to Tijuana (averaging 47 deportations per day).⁴¹ The deported Mexican citizens are sent first to the government’s Flamingos shelter in Tijuana.⁴² They are then mostly bused into Mexico’s interior.</p>

Conditions at the Border: February 2026 (continued)

Mexican City	# of People Estimated in City	City Conditions
Tijuana, Baja California <i>(continued)</i>		Local organizations also report an increase in the number of non-Mexicans being deported through Tijuana. This includes non-Mexican nationals with “withholding of removal” statuses in the United States.

**The numbers should be interpreted as a general range rather than an exact figure.*

ENDNOTES

1. U.S. Customs and Border Protection, “Implementation of Active Executive Orders - February 28, 2025,” February 28, 2025.
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4. During the metering phase, some waitlist managers engaged in corrupt activities that led to non-sequential processing of waiting asylum seekers.
5. During the “CBP One and Title 42” phase, individuals using the CBP One application had to attest that they met certain vulnerability requirements, which exempted them from the Title 42 health order. However, in practice, all asylum seekers could request a processing appointment through the application.
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