

METERING UPDATE

MAY 2021



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INTRODUCTION

In April 2018, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) leadership [issued guidance](#) that allowed officers to limit asylum seekers' access to ports of entry. This guidance permitted CBP officers stationed at the United States' international boundary with Mexico to inform arriving asylum seekers that U.S. ports of entry were full. Simultaneously, CBP officers also began accepting a specified number of asylum seekers each day, in a process that is known as metering. In June 2018, then-DHS Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen [signed a memorandum that authorized port directors to begin metering](#) at all U.S. ports of entry. This memorandum also informed port directors that processing individuals without travel documents—including asylum seekers—was not a priority, and that CBP personnel should instead focus on alternative missions, such as narcotics interdiction and stopping currency smuggling.

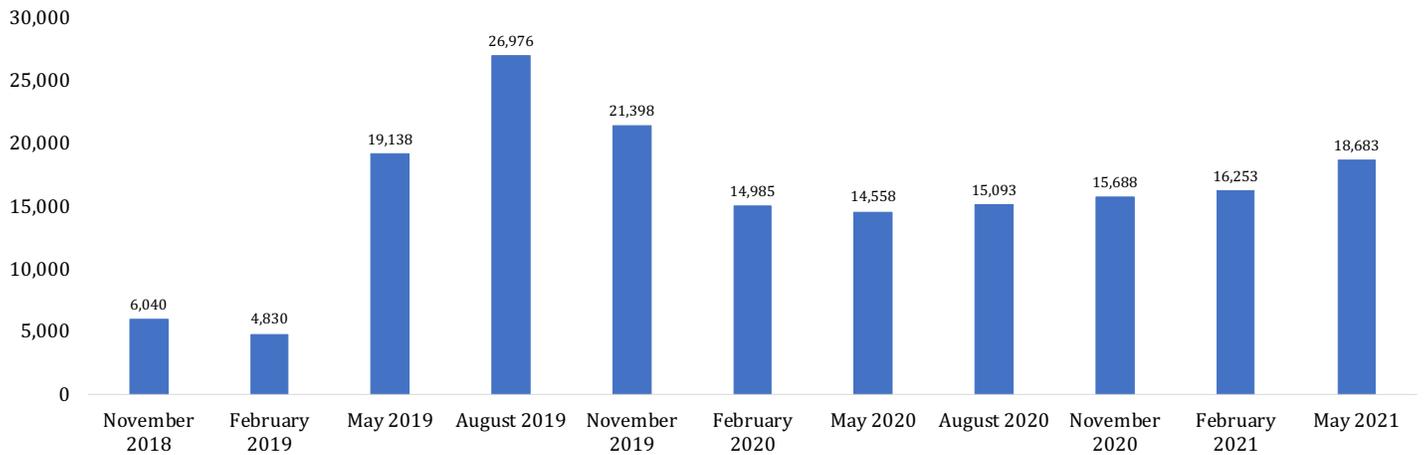
As a subsequent backlog of asylum seekers grew in Mexico's border cities, Mexican authorities and civil society groups responded by providing humanitarian assistance and creating informal waitlists. Since November 2018, the Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law at the University of Texas at Austin—at times in collaboration with the Center for U.S.-Mexico Studies at the University of California San Diego and the Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute—has documented these informal lists through quarterly updates.

As the pandemic began in March 2020, CBP stopped processing asylum requests at ports of entry. This change was due to the Center for Disease Control's (CDC) new [regulation](#) based on Title 42 authority and an order that blocked entry for individuals—including asylum seekers—seeking to enter the United States through Mexico without valid travel documents.¹ The use of Title 42 to restrict asylum seeker processing has been controversial, and [public health experts](#) have claimed that it has no basis in public health.

Since taking office, President Joe Biden has promised to restore asylum processing at the U.S.-Mexico border.² However, the CDC has not rescinded Title 42, and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) continues to enforce the measure, which prevents the resumption of routine asylum processing at ports of entry.³ To date, it appears that the administration has also left in place CBP's April 2018 metering guidance and Nielsen's June 2018 memorandum authorizing CBP's port directors to implement metering.

This report provides an update on metering lists, asylum seekers, and migrant shelters along the U.S.-Mexico border amid CBP's asylum processing suspension. It documents approximately 18,680 asylum seekers on waitlists in eight Mexican border cities. This is an approximately 15 percent increase from [February 2021](#), when there were 16,250 asylum seekers on the lists.

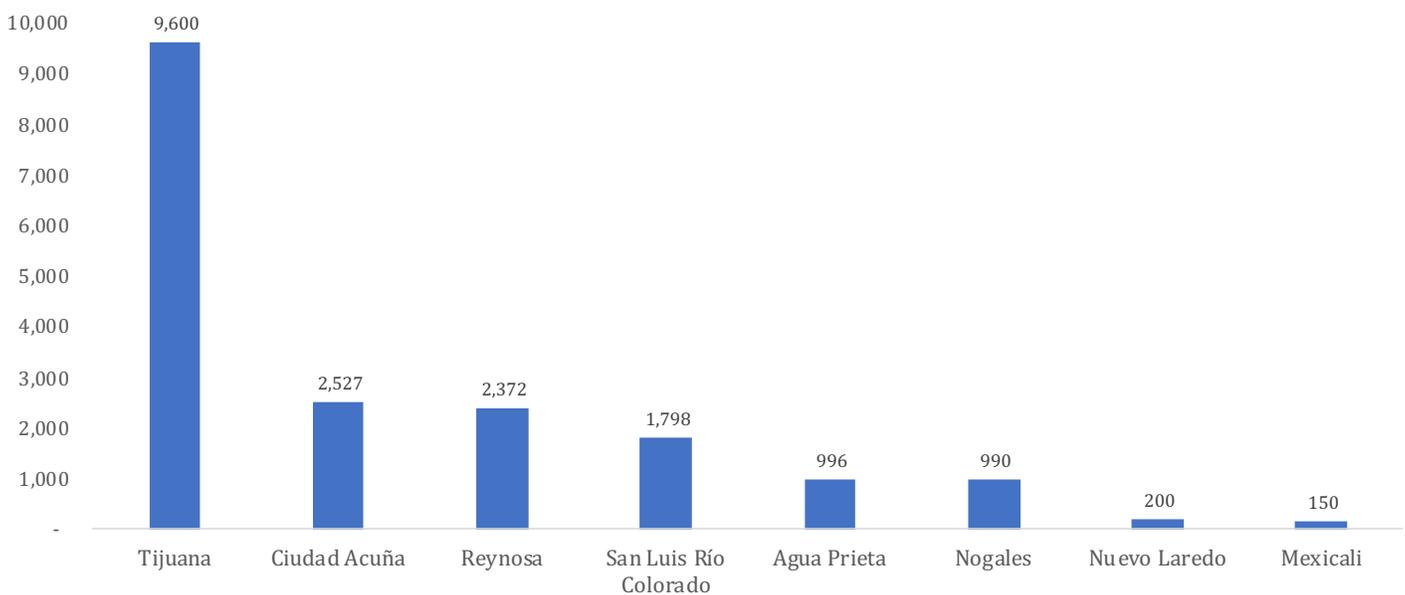
Figure 1: Number of People on Asylum Waitlists (November 2018 - May 2021)



Author's elaboration. Data collected from November 2018 to May 2021.

While the number of people on several waitlists has recently increased, the names on these waitlists should not be understood as a proxy for the number of asylum seekers in Mexican border cities. Since March 2020, list managers have reported that asylum seekers on waitlists have entered the United States between ports of entry, returned or been deported to their countries of origin, or moved to other cities in Mexico's interior. In addition, asylum seekers have continued to arrive over the past year, and many have been unable or unwilling to sign up for a list.

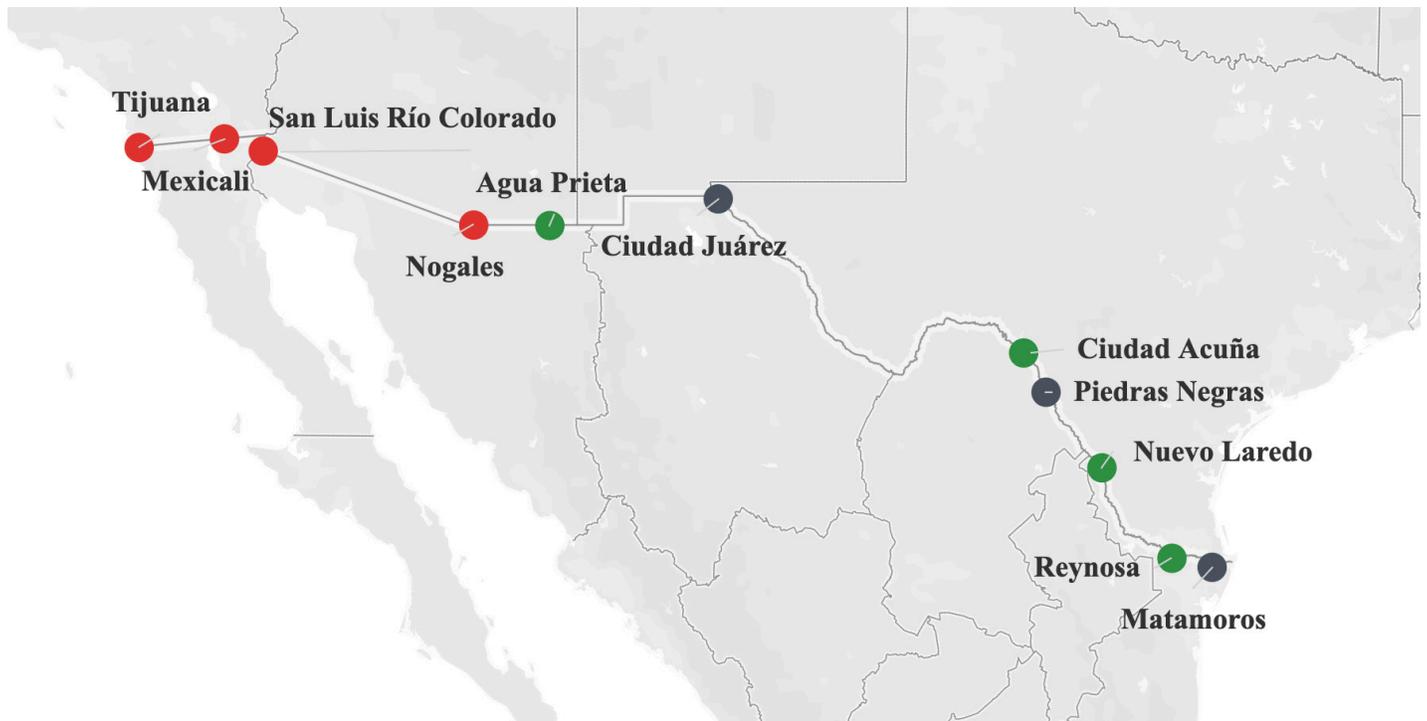
Figure 2: Number of People on Asylum Waitlists by City (May 2021)



Author's elaboration. Data collected from May 2, 2021 to May 8, 2021.

More than a year ago, in late March 2020, many asylum waitlists closed to new entrants and the number of asylum seekers on these lists remained frozen. Figure 3 shows the status of asylum waitlists by Mexican border city. Green circles indicate cities where asylum waitlists are open; red circles indicate cities with closed asylum waitlists; and gray circles indicate cities where waitlists have been dissolved after no names remained.

Figure 3: Mexican Border Cities By List Status (May 2021)



Author's elaboration. Data collected from May 2, 2021 to May 8, 2021.

Asylum waitlists remain open in Reynosa, Nuevo Laredo, Ciudad Acuña, and Agua Prieta. Since February 2021, approximately 2,430 asylum seekers have signed up on these four lists. While some asylum seekers have only been waiting a few months, others have been waiting for up to a year and a half. In the past few months, there have been reports of asylum seekers on closed lists who have traveled to cities with open lists.

Asylum seekers on waitlists continue to face unstable living conditions and security risks in Mexican border cities. In many border cities, migrant shelters have reached capacity due to an increase in the arrivals of asylum seekers. This is in part because many shelters are operating at a reduced capacity due to COVID-19 precautions, and some remain closed. Over the past few months, encampments formed outside ports of entry in [Tijuana](#) and [Reynosa](#), due to misinformation about the Biden administration's potential asylum related policy changes, large numbers of Title 42 expulsions, and frustration among asylum seekers. Asylum seekers in the encampments face poor conditions and heightened insecurity.

Since the last metering update, Mexican authorities have increased migration-related enforcement. Mexico has informally committed to maintaining [up to 9,000 National Guard members](#) deployed in northern border cities to support its migration authorities. Since many asylum seekers on waitlists lack migration documentation in Mexico, this increased enforcement puts them at risk of apprehension and deportation to their countries of origin. In April, Mexico's *Secretaría de Seguridad y Protección Ciudadana* (SSPC) and *Instituto Nacional de Migración* (INM) [announced a policy](#) requiring transportation companies to take immediate action to prevent migrants without legal status from traveling within Mexico or face fines.

Certain groups of asylum seekers on waitlists continue to experience additional challenges. Civil society organizations report that Black, LGBTQ and Indigenous asylum seekers have faced targeted discrimination by local authorities while waiting in Mexican border cities. In addition, asylum seekers without documentation in Mexico have been unable to [access COVID-19 vaccines](#). Non-Spanish speaking asylum seekers have also struggled to access information about the evolving pandemic guidelines.

The May 2021 metering update draws on phone and WhatsApp interviews with asylum seekers, government officials, and civil society organizations on both sides of the border. It also relies on local news articles to fill in any gaps.

Metering & Asylum Waitlists: May 2021

Mexican City <i>List Administrator</i>	Waitlist Status	# of Asylum Seekers on List <i>Date Recorded</i>	Estimated Time on Waitlist (Maximum)	Recent Changes
Matamoros, Tamaulipas	Closed	0 people <i>May 5, 2021</i>	N/A	<p>There is no longer a waitlist in Matamoros. Previously, there were two lists: INM managed a list for non-Mexican asylum seekers and Mexican asylum seekers managed their own list.</p> <p>Between February 25 and March 5, the 50 to 60 Mexican asylum seekers who were on the Mexican list and living in the Matamoros encampment were processed into the United States, when the camp was completely dismantled as part of the Migrant Protection Protocol (MPP) wind down efforts. ⁴</p> <p>Migrants continue to arrive in Matamoros. The majority are Mexican nationals from the states of Guerrero, Chiapas, and Oaxaca. There are also individuals arriving from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.</p> <p>Currently, most migrants in the city are staying in shelters, rented rooms, or motels.</p>
Reynosa, Tamaulipas <i>Senda de Vida migrant shelter</i>	Open	2,372 people <i>May 5, 2021</i>	15 to 16 months	<p>The Senda de Vida migrant shelter manages a waitlist for asylum seekers in Reynosa. The list remains open and, since February 15, approximately 870 asylum seekers have signed up.</p> <p>The majority of the asylum seekers on the list are from Central American countries. There are also some African asylum seekers on the list from the countries of Sierra Leone, Uganda, Nigeria, and Senegal.</p>

Metering & Asylum Waitlists: May 2021 (continued)

Mexican City <i>List Administrator</i>	Waitlist Status	# of Asylum Seekers on List <i>Date Recorded</i>	Estimated Time on Waitlist (Maximum)	Recent Changes
Reynosa, Tamaulipas <i>(continued)</i>				<p>At the beginning of April, an encampment of asylum seekers formed in the Reynosa “Plaza de la República”, blocks away from the McAllen-Hidalgo-Reynosa International Bridge. By the beginning of May, the camp had grown to over 700 people.⁵ There is limited infrastructure in the camp, and asylum seekers are at risk of kidnapping and assault, especially at night. Local NGOs have provided food and medical support to those living in the encampment.</p>
Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas <i>Network of six migrant shelters managing six separate lists (one per shelter)</i>	Open	~200 people <i>May 6, 2021</i>	16 months	<p>A network of six migrant shelters in Nuevo Laredo manage six separate waitlists.</p> <p>Since February, the shelters report that the lists have slightly increased. Many of the city’s shelters have reached capacity. In response, the municipal government has opened additional migrant shelters.</p>
Piedras Negras, Coahuila <i>Municipal government</i>	Closed	0 people <i>May 4, 2021</i>	N/A	<p>The asylum waitlist in Piedras Negras has been closed since March 2020 and no one remains on the waitlist.</p> <p>All shelters in the city remain closed due to the municipal government’s COVID-19 guidelines. However, on April 29, the municipal government permitted shelters and churches that comply with sanitation protocols to resume distributing meals. Currently, around 75 meals are provided twice per day.</p> <p>Approximately 60 migrants continue to arrive daily to Piedras Negras. Since the city’s shelters remain closed, many have slept on the streets, in abandoned buildings, or in bus terminals.</p>

Metering & Asylum Waitlists: May 2021 (continued)

Mexican City <i>List Administrator</i>	Waitlist Status	# of Asylum Seekers on List <i>Date Recorded</i>	Estimated Time on Waitlist (Maximum)	Recent Changes
Piedras Negras, Coahuila <i>(continued)</i>				<p>Mexican authorities continue to patrol the streets, detaining migrants without documentation. These individuals are then deported to their countries of origin.</p>
Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila <i>Civil Protection (Protección Civil): individuals & families</i>	Open	2,527 people 627 individuals 1,900 people traveling in families <i>May 5, 2021</i>	18 months	<p>Civil Protection runs two lists in Ciudad Acuña: one for individuals and one for families. The lists remain open and, since February, more than 1,000 people have signed up.</p> <p>In recent months, an increasing number of Venezuelan asylum seekers have signed up for the lists. Many asylum seekers on the lists are staying in rented apartments in the city.</p>
Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua <i>State Population Council (Consejo Estatal de Población, COESPO)</i>	Closed	0 people <i>May 4, 2021</i>	N/A	<p>The asylum waitlist in Ciudad Juárez remains closed and no asylum seekers remain on the list.</p> <p>There has not been enough space in the filter hotels for new arrivals in the city. The municipal government opened a temporary shelter in the Kiko Romero gymnasium with capacity for 400 people.⁶ Over the past two months, it has held 200 to 250 people per day. After their stay in the temporary shelter, individuals are directed to the federal shelter for COVID-19 testing.</p>
Agua Prieta, Sonora <i>CAME migrant shelter</i>	Open	996 people <i>May 5, 2021</i>	18 months	<p>The CAME migrant shelter manages the waitlist in Agua Prieta.</p> <p>The list manager continues to accept new entrants by phone, yet discourages asylum seekers from signing up, due to the COVID-19 border restrictions. Over the last three months, the list manager has added nearly 100 people to the list.</p>

Metering & Asylum Waitlists: May 2021 (continued)

Mexican City <i>List Administrator</i>	Waitlist Status	# of Asylum Seekers on List <i>Date Recorded</i>	Estimated Time on Waitlist (Maximum)	Recent Changes
Nogales, Sonora <i>Municipal government</i>	Closed	990 people <i>May 4, 2021</i>	19 months	<p>The asylum waitlist in Nogales has remained closed since March 2020.</p> <p>The Nogales municipal government continues to be unresponsive about the status of the waitlist despite multiple attempts by a local organization to communicate with the local government.⁷</p>
San Luis Río Colorado, Sonora <i>Casa del Migrante La Divina Providencia</i>	Closed	1,798 people <i>May 8, 2021</i>	18 months	<p>The Casa del Migrante La Divina Providencia has been closed since November 2020. Many of the asylum seekers on the list have gone to live in cities in Mexico’s interior and continue to call the shelter daily for updates.</p> <p>Asylum seekers from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—and to a lesser extent Haiti—have continued to arrive in the city.</p>
Mexicali, Baja California <i>Grupo Beta</i>	Closed	150 people <i>May 6, 2021</i>	19 to 20 months	<p>The asylum waitlist in Mexicali has remained closed since March 2020.</p> <p>The majority of the shelters remain closed as a result of the pandemic. Only three shelters are currently operational for longer-term stays, but none of the shelters are accepting new entrants.</p> <p>The majority of migrants arriving to Mexicali are Mexican, Guatemalan, and Honduran, with some arrivals from Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.</p>

Metering & Asylum Waitlists: May 2021 (continued)

Mexican City <i>List Administrator</i>	Waitlist Status	# of Asylum Seekers on List <i>Date Recorded</i>	Estimated Time on Waitlist (Maximum)	Recent Changes
Tijuana, Baja California <i>Grupo Beta / Support from asylum seekers</i>	Closed	9,600 people <i>May 1, 2021</i>	19 to 20 months	<p>The asylum waitlist in Tijuana has remained closed since March 2020.</p> <p>In late February, an encampment began to form in front of the Chaparral / San Ysidro PedWest Port of Entry of asylum seekers who had been waiting in the city, including those on the waitlist.⁸</p> <p>Over the past few months, the encampment has grown.</p> <p>According to advocates' estimates, 2,000 people are living in the camp. Within the encampment, several new lists have been created for asylum seekers waiting to be processed into the United States.</p> <p>The conditions in the camp are poor. There are few portable bathrooms and showers, which are cleaned infrequently. Residents rely on food donations from local organizations and Tijuana residents. Additionally, there are heightened security concerns within the camp as migrants have been robbed and harassed.</p> <p>Due to the conditions, asylum seekers have started to abandon the camp to travel to other border cities or look for alternative accommodations in shelters.⁹</p>

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

ENDNOTES

- 1 The order also allows Border Patrol agents to immediately expel all apprehended individuals, including asylum seekers, to the nearest Mexican city or to their home countries.
- 2 On February 2, 2021, President Biden signed an [executive order](#) on regional migration and asylum processing that stated that Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, and the CDC would soon begin steps to resume asylum processing at the border, “consistent with public health and safety and capacity constraints.”
- 3 While routine asylum processing at ports of entry remains suspended, select populations have been processed at ports over the past three months. On February 11, [the Biden administration](#) announced that it would begin to wind down the [Migrant Protections Protocol \(MPP\) program](#)—or Remain in Mexico—by processing individuals into the United States for the duration of their asylum cases. Between January 2019 and January 2021 these individuals had been returned to Mexico through MPP to await their U.S. asylum hearings. As of May 10, CBP had processed more than 10,000 of these individuals into the United States through ports of entry in the following locations: San Ysidro, El Paso, Brownsville, Laredo, McAllen, and Eagle Pass. In addition, DHS has recently granted [humanitarian exemptions under Title 42](#) to a small number of asylum seekers with vulnerabilities, who are then processed into the United States at ports of entry.
- 4 Interview with civil society organizations in Brownsville and Reynosa, May 6, 2021.
- 5 Sandra Sanchez, “New migrant camp swells to 700 in Reynosa, Mexico; Asylum-seekers get vital help from volunteers,” Border Report, May 3, 2021, <https://www.borderreport.com/hot-topics/immigration/new-migrant-camp-swells-to-700-in-reynosa-mexico-asylum-seekers-get-vital-help-from-volunteers/>.
- 6 Paola Gamboa, “Recibirá gimnasio Kiki Romero a 400 migrantes,” El Herald de Juárez. April 6, 2021, <https://www.elheraldode-juarez.com.mx/local/recibira-gimnasio-kiki-romero-a-400-migrantes-noticias-ciudad-juarez-migracion-al-norte-de-mexico-chihuahua-6561929.html>.
- 7 Interview with local organization, May 8, 2021.
- 8 Kate Morrissey, “Asylum seekers at San Diego border ask Biden for answers amid inconsistent policies,” San Diego Union Tribune, March 21, 2021, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/immigration/story/2021-03-21/san-diego-migrants-border>.
- 9 Cinthya Gomez “Migrantes del campamento en El Chaparral en Tijuana optan por refugiarse en albergues o viajar a otras ciudades,” Telemundo, April 27, 2021, <https://www.telemundo20.com/noticias/local/migrantes-del-campamento-en-el-chaparral-en-tijuana-optan-por-refugiarse-en-albergues-o-viajar-a-otras-ciudades/2113069/>.