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

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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 clandestine 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 a digital lottery system, and the partial or complete blocking of access to the U.S. asylum 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 changes 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. Officially, unaccompanied minors are still able to seek asylum at ports of entry along the U.S.-Mexico border.[1] However, from March 2025 through April 2026, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data shows that CBP officers processed only 80 non-Mexican unaccompanied minors at border ports of entry.[2] By comparison, in January 2025 alone, CBP processed 361 non-Mexican unaccompanied minors at these ports of entry.[3]

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 and 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 5,190 individuals remain in Mexican border cities. These individuals are concentrated in Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, and Mexicali, with these three cities hosting roughly 78 percent of the border's estimated migrant population. This number has been consistent over the past year, and matches migration levels last seen at the border in 2018 or 2019.

Migrants residing in northern Mexican border cities are 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.[4]

This May 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 May 18, 2026 through May 21, 2026. It also relies on local news articles to fill in any gaps.

ASYLUM PROCESSING PHASES

Over the past eight 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 - May 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[5]
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[6]	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 subsequently claim asylum 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's lottery system, 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.[7] This meant that CBP officials continued to process walk ups, but that 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."[8] 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 between ports of entry per day over a seven day period.[9] 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

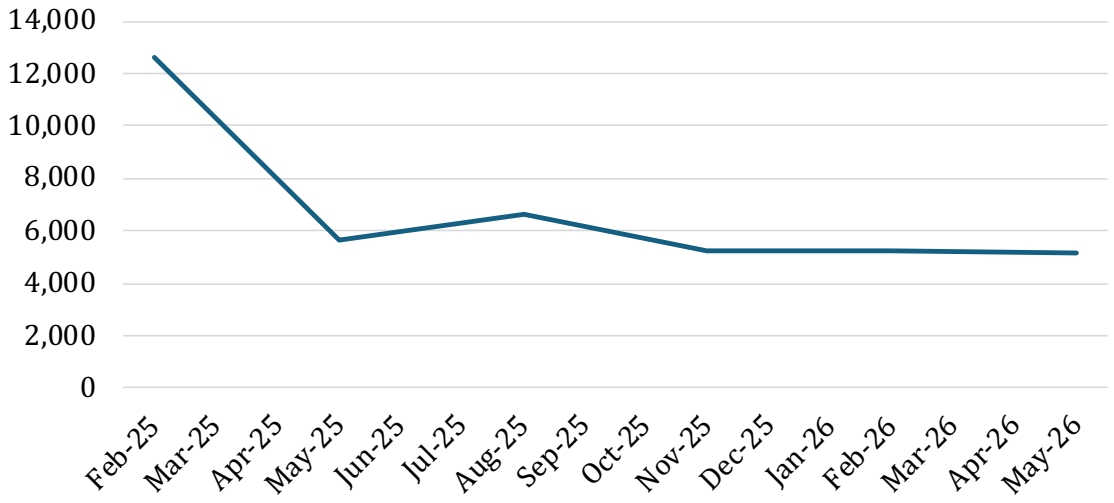
asylum seekers from both entering the United States and accessing the U.S. immigration system.[10]

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.[11] Since early 2025, the U.S. government has signed both asylum cooperative agreements and third-country repatriation agreements with at least 33 countries to accept citizens other than their own.[12]

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. Many migrants initially left Mexican border cities, with some returning to their communities or countries of origin or crossing into the United States as clandestine migrants. Other migrants traveled to larger interior cities—such as Monterrey, Guadalajara, and Mexico City—with thousands of migrants continuing to live on these cities' streets and in rented spaces.[13] However, as of May 2026, an estimated 5,190 migrants continue to reside in Mexican border cities.

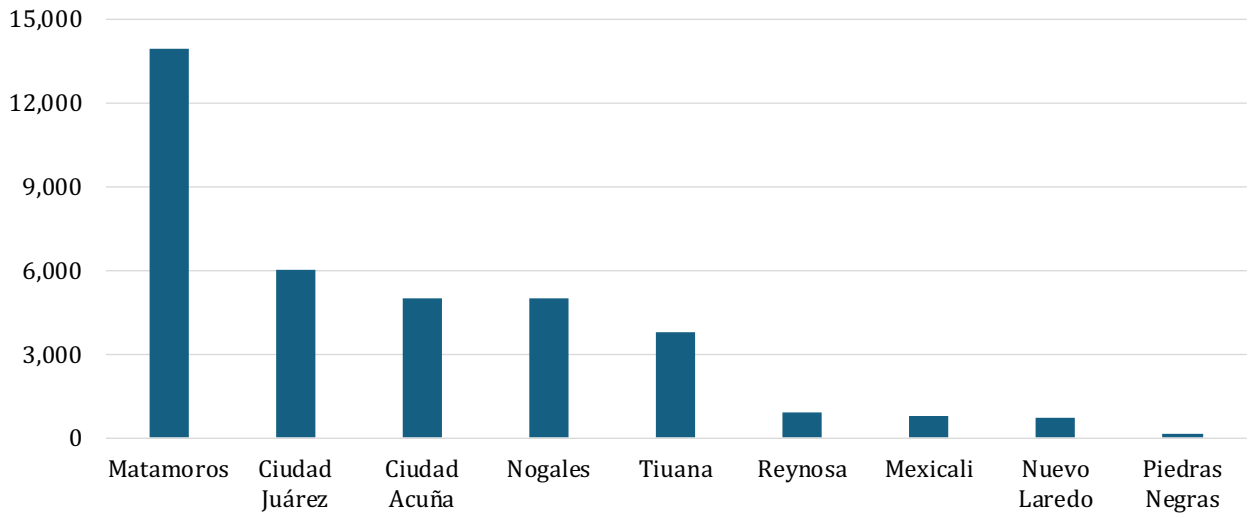
Figure 2: Migrants Living in Mexican Border Cities (February 2025 to May 2026)



Authors' elaboration

One of the Trump administration's central policy promises was to increase the number of deportations. From the start of the Trump administration through April 16, 2026, U.S. authorities deported 203,685 Mexican citizens to Mexico.[14] During this period, U.S. authorities flew some individuals to Mexico's interior and deported other individuals through ports of entry along the U.S.-Mexico land border. However, these deportations were not evenly distributed among border cities. As Figure 3 shows, during the first three months of 2026, more than a third of all Mexican citizen deportations went through just one city: Matamoros. Since mid-April 2026, U.S. authorities have largely paused deportations along the U.S.-Mexico land border and have instead flown most Mexican migrants to the country's interior, including to the southern border cities of Tapachula, Chiapas and Villahermosa, Tabasco.[15]

Figure 3: U.S. Land Deportations of Mexican Citizens by Border City (January 2025 to March 2026)



Source: Mexican government data[16]

Additionally, according to Mexico's own data, between January 20, 2025 and February 15, 2026, the Trump administration has also sent around 16,000 non-Mexican individuals to Mexico.[17] 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. Yet, local organizations have also reported the deportation of individuals from various countries in Africa, Asia, and Europe. Mexican authorities generally fly or bus these non-Mexican citizens to Villahermosa, Tabasco. Once in southern Mexico, they lack work permits, receive no comprehensive assistance from the Mexican government, and often do not have a means of subsistence.

The situation on the ground in Mexico for migrants continues to be challenging. For migrants seeking refugee status in Mexico, there is a two year wait time—placing many individuals and families in limbo.[18] Meanwhile, all 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 asylum seekers 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: MAY 2026

Mexican City	# of People Estimated in City	City Conditions
Matamoros, Tamaulipas	**~250 people** *May 20, 2026*	As of May 2026, there are approximately 250 migrants living in Matamoros.[22] At least 100 of these individuals are non-Mexican citizens, including people from Honduras, Venezuela, El Salvador, Colombia, and Cuba, among other nationalities. These non-Mexican citizens range from small children to elderly adults. Individuals residing in Matamoros have generally attempted to regularize their migratory status in the city. They have found work and enrolled their children in school. However, some individuals have resisted regularizing their legal status in Mexico, with the goal of waiting until the United States eventually changes its immigration policy and they can cross the border to seek asylum. Until mid-April 2026, U.S. authorities deported a large number of individuals by land to Matamoros.[23] During the first three months of 2026, Mexican government data registered nearly 14,000 deported Mexican citizens through Matamoros.[24] This was the highest number of Mexican citizen deportations in any border city. Currently, U.S. authorities are not deporting Mexican citizens to Matamoros, but rather flying them to southern Mexico. Civil society organizations report that other individuals have self deported to Matamoros. They note that when these individuals have support networks in their home communities or in the United States, they often buy bus or plane tickets and quickly leave the city. However, not everyone has this support, and some people who self deport end up stranded in the city.

Conditions at the Border: May 2026 (continued)

Mexican City	# of People Estimated in City	City Conditions
Reynosa, Tamaulipas	**~600 people** *May 21, 2026*	Currently, there are an estimated 600 to 700 migrants in Reynosa. The city's shelters remain relatively empty. For example, the Senda de Vida shelters are housing approximately 70 migrants, who are mostly recently arrived families. 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 legal status in Mexico. Overall, the vast majority of the migrants in Reynosa are from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Cuba, and Venezuela. During the first three months of 2026, U.S. authorities continued to regularly deport people to Reynosa. The Mexican government reported that over this period, approximately 940 deported Mexican citizens passed through Reynosa.[25] In mid-April, U.S. authorities began to deport much smaller numbers of people to the city. Organizations in Reynosa note that U.S. authorities are still deporting small numbers of third-country nationals to the city. These individuals generally had some form of permanent or temporary status in Mexico before crossing into the United States, and are from a range of countries including Cuba, China, and Cameroon. Mexican authorities have released these non-Mexican individuals directly into the city.
Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas	**~25 people** *May 21, 2026*	As of May 2026, there are an estimated 20 to 30 migrants in Nuevo Laredo. There are currently no migrant shelters operating in the city.[26] Most migrants in Nuevo Laredo are residing in hotels, apartments, or rented rooms. In contrast to other border cities, these migrants are not seeking to regularize their status but rather hope to cross irregularly into the United States between ports of entry. During the first three months of 2026, U.S. authorities continued to deport people to Nuevo Laredo. Over this period, Mexican authorities reported that around 750 deported Mexican citizens passed through the city.[27] Since April 2026, U.S. authorities have deported fewer people to Nuevo Laredo, although there continue to be small numbers of people sent to the city.[28]

Conditions at the Border: May 2026 (continued)

Mexican City	# of People Estimated in City	City Conditions
Piedras Negras, Coahuila	**~150 people** *May 21, 2026*	Currently, there are an estimated 150 to 300 migrants in Piedras Negras. Local organizations reported that there are approximately 50 migrants staying in the city's shelters.[29] The remaining migrants live in apartments or rented rooms. Most of the migrants in Piedras Negras are from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Colombia, and Mexico. The vast majority of these individuals were deported within the last year and have journeyed back to the U.S.-Mexico border. Most of these individuals are hoping to eventually cross into the United States again. U.S. authorities have deported very few migrants to Piedras Negras. During the first three months of 2026, the Mexican government reported only 151 deported Mexicans passing through the city.[30] Since mid-April 2026, local organizations have noted that the city has only received a few deported people every two to three weeks, including both Mexican nationals and individuals from third countries.[31] Instead, U.S. authorities generally deported people through nearby Ciudad Acuña. During the first three months of 2026, Mexican authorities registered more than 5,000 deported Mexican citizens passing through the city.[32] These migrants were immediately taken to Rosita, Coahuila, before being bused into the Mexican interior.
Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua	**~1,250 people** *May 21, 2026*	As of May 2026, there are an estimated 1,250 migrants living in Ciudad Juárez.[33] The city's shelters are close to empty. For example, in mid-April 2026, the Leona Vicario shelter hosted 60 people, totaling just 5 percent of the shelter's capacity.[34] The individuals who remain in Ciudad Juárez are generally not looking to irregularly cross into the United States. Instead, they are seeking ways to stay in Mexico, regularize their status, and find stable employment. The city's security situation continues to be challenging for migrants. On April 20, 2026, Mexican authorities located 15 kidnapped migrants in the city, and detained five suspects.[35] Over the first three months of 2026, U.S. authorities continued to deport people to Ciudad Juárez. During this period, Mexican government data registered about 6,000 deported Mexican citizens

Conditions at the Border: May 2026 (continued)

Mexican City	# of People Estimated in City	City Conditions
Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua *(continued)*		who passed through the city.[36] However, since April 2026, the number of deported Mexican citizens has dropped to four or five individuals a day.
Agua Prieta, Sonora	**~10 people** *May 21, 2026*	Currently, there are an estimated 11 migrants (two families and one individual) living in Agua Prieta. One family has members from Cuba and El Salvador. The remaining individuals are Mexican citizens (from Morelos and Quintana Roo). Agua Prieta does not have a designated port of entry for land-based deportations. During the first three months of 2026, the Mexican government did not report a single Mexican citizen deportation through the city.[37] Most land-based deportations in Sonora have occurred through Nogales.
Nogales, Sonora	**~100 people** *May 20, 2026*	In Nogales, there are currently an estimated 100 migrants in the city. 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 (*tarjeta humanitaria*). This card allows refugee-status applicants to legally work in Mexico and access healthcare and education. Over the first three months of 2026, U.S. authorities continued to deport people to Nogales. During this period, the Mexican government registered about 5,000 deported Mexican citizens who passed through the city.[38] However, as of mid-April 2026, U.S. authorities have not deported any Mexican citizens to the city. Instead, they have sent all these individuals to southern Mexico by plane.

Conditions at the Border: May 2026 (continued)

Mexican City	# of People Estimated in City	City Conditions
San Luis Río Colorado, Sonora	**~5 people** *May 20, 2026*	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 four and five migrants at a time. Migrants in San Luis Río Colorado are often looking to cross between ports of entry and may have run out of resources. The vast majority of these individuals are Mexican citizens. Over the first three months of 2026, U.S. authorities deported a small number of Mexican citizens to San Luis Río Colorado, totaling 96 people.[39] Most deportations in the area go through nearby Nogales.
Mexicali, Baja California	**~800 people** *May 20, 2026*	As of May 2026, there are an estimated 800 migrants in Mexicali. Local organizations report that about 400 migrants are currently residing in shelters and another approximately 400 migrants are renting rooms or living on the streets. The vast majority of these individuals are from Mexico—in particular, the states of Michoacán, Jalisco, and Sinaloa—as well as from El Salvador and Honduras. Most migrants in Mexicali have been there for at least a year and are looking to regularize their status and obtain steady employment. However, due to regularization delays and difficulties finding jobs, local organizations have reported a recent uptick in the number of migrants relying on local soup kitchens. Over the first three months of 2026, U.S. authorities continued to deport people to Mexicali. During this time period, the Mexican government registered about 825 deported Mexican citizens passing through the city.[40] In mid-April 2026, the number of deportees began to fall. Yet the Peregrino shelter and Mana shelters continue to report a small number of deportees arriving in the city. These individuals are primarily from Mexico, but also include people from Cuba.

Conditions at the Border: May 2026 (continued)

Mexican City	# of People Estimated in City	City Conditions
Tijuana, Baja California	**~2,000 people** *May 20, 2026*	In Tijuana, there are currently an estimated 2,000 migrants 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. The majority of the individuals in the city are not Mexican citizens and come from a range of countries, such as Haiti, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and several African countries. Most of these individuals are seeking to obtain refugee status in Mexico. However, local organizations report long wait times and a lack of response from the local Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) office. There is also a small number of displaced Mexicans living in Tijuana. Local organizations also report a small uptick in the number of migrants arriving in Tijuana and attempting to cross irregularly into the United States. For instance, on May 19, U.S. authorities detained 19 migrants—including three unaccompanied minors—who were attempting to enter U.S. territory through a cross-border drainage system in the area.[41] Over the first three months of 2026, U.S. authorities continued to deport people to Tijuana. During this period, the Mexican government reported more than 3,800 deportations of Mexican citizens to the city.[42] Mexican officials route these deportees to the government's Flamingos shelter.[43] They are then mostly bused into Mexico's interior, though some—especially those who lived for many years in the United States—-stay in Tijuana as they weigh their next steps.[44] There have also been instances of third country nationals deported through Tijuana. Most are immediately bused to southern Mexico, although, in a few instances, these non-Mexican citizen deportees have been released into Tijuana. However, in mid-April 2026, the number of Mexican and non-Mexican deportees arriving in Tijuana began to decrease. However, in mid-April 2026, the number of Mexican and non-Mexican deportees arriving in Tijuana began to decrease.

**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.
2. This number includes only non-Mexican unaccompanied minors that the Office of Field Operations personnel processed under Title 8 authority at ports of entry along the Southwest Land Border. U.S. Customs and Border Protection, "Nationwide Encounters," accessed on May 20, 2026, https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/nationwide-encounters.
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