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How Many Mexicans and Central Americans Are Heading North?

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This past July, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reported more than 212,000 encounters at the U.S.-Mexico border—the highest number since March 2000. This number is useful for highlighting migration intensity and trends. Yet, it tells only part of the story. The number of encounters does not tell us the total number of irregular migrants crossing into the United States nor the total number of people leaving their countries and heading north.

Back in March 2019, then LBJ School student Sarah Spalding and I attempted to answer these two questions by building a model for the *Lawfare Blog*.[1] The model aimed to measure how many people from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras were migrating north, and relied on public CBP data.

In the past month, I returned to this model to better understand today's migration dynamics. However, I quickly realized that the original inputs and assumptions no longer matched migration realities and set out to build a new and expanded model.

Before jumping into the nuts and bolts, a few words on what this model does and does not cover. The model focuses on unique individual (by subtracting repeat encounters) and aims to capture populations not covered by CBP data, particularly undetected individuals and people migrating who never make it to the U.S.-Mexico border. Conversely, the model does not provide exact numbers. More precise figures would require access to CBP's databases for more accurate assumptions on repeat crossings and, even then, the model would have to make several very imprecise assumptions.

Now, back to the model. To answer the question of how many people are leaving El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and now, also Mexico, requires working backwards and beginning at the U.S.-Mexico border. Every month, CBP publishes its number of encounters, which means interactions with irregular migrants both between ports of entry (apprehensions) and at ports of entry (inadmissibles). CBP then breaks down this data by nationality and category of individual, which are families, unaccompanied minors, or single adults.

Importantly, CBP also distinguishes between individuals processed under Title 8 immigration code and those processed under the Title 42 public health authority, which has been used during the COVID-19 pandemic. This distinction may seem technical, but it is critical to understanding current migration dynamics and is highlighted in the following paragraphs.

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[1] Stephanie Leutert and Sarah Spalding, "How Many Central Americans are Traveling North?" *Lawfare Blog*, March 14, 2019, https://www.lawfareblog.com/how-many-central-americans-are-traveling-north.

This new model is constructed around three demographic categories of individuals. These categories are the foundational building blocks for understanding migration dynamics, because U.S. policy and law treats each group differently.

Let's begin with families. Currently, most families who arrive at the U.S.-Mexico border cross into U.S. territory between ports of entry. Once these families enter the United States, Border Patrol agents either: 1) process them under Title 8 and release them into border communities with a "Notice to Appear" at a future immigration hearing or 2) expel them to Mexico under the Title 42 public health authority. The distinction of who is sent back depends on factors such as the family's nationality, the ages of the children, acute vulnerabilities, and pure luck.

In August 2021, 70 percent of families were processed under Title 8, and 30 percent were expelled to Mexico or Guatemala under Title 42. Since January 2021, the percent of families processed under Title 42 has dropped precipitously, due to Mexico's decision to only accept expulsions of families with children older than six and a cap of 100 expulsions per day in various Mexican border cities. This past month, the number of expulsions to Guatemala increased as U.S. officials began flying some expelled Guatemalan families directly back to their country of origin.[2]

Graph 1: Percent of Families Processed Under Title 42 (March 2020 - August 2021)
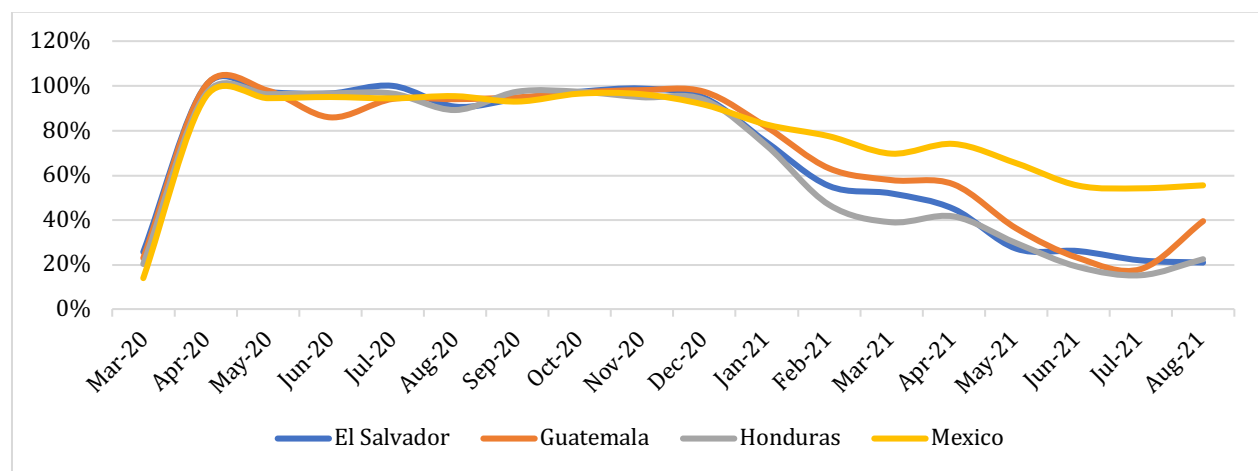
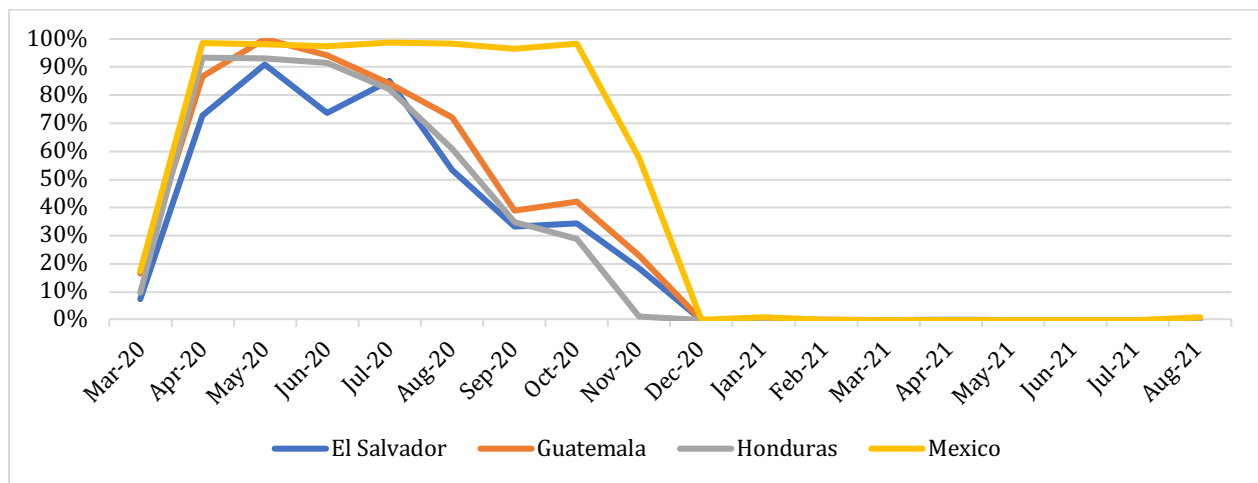*Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection Data*

For Central American and Mexican unaccompanied minors, nationality plays an important role in understanding U.S. policy. CBP currently processes all Central American unaccompanied minors who arrive at the border under Title 8 and refers them to the United States' Health and Human Services (HHS) shelters. Most are ultimately released to sponsors in the United States. By comparison, CBP generally returns Mexican unaccompanied minors to Mexico, although HHS statistics show that CBP refers about 15 percent of Mexican unaccompanied minors to HHS shelters.[3]

In March 2020, the Trump administration began expelling Central American and Mexican unaccompanied minors to their countries of origin under Title 42. However, in November 2020, a U.S. federal judge halted this practice, and, in January 2021, the Biden administration chose not to reinstate it.

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[2] Sofia Menchu, "'Not the plan': Guatemalan migrants lament fast track deportations," August 4, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/not-plan-guatemalan-migrants-lament-fast-track-deportations-2021-08-05/.

[3] "Unaccompanied Children – Facts and Data," Office of Refugee Resettlement, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, accessed on August 18, 2021, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/about/ucs/facts-and-data.

Graph 2: Percent of Unaccompanied Minors Processed Under Title 42 (March 2020 - August 2021)

Finally, Central American and Mexican single adults who arrive at the border face a vastly different process. Prior to March 2020, these adults were generally processed under Title 8. They would be referred for prosecution for the misdemeanor offense of irregular entry and then removed to their countries of origin. However, since March 2020, CBP has expelled around 95 percent of single adults to Mexico under Title 42—including more than 75,000 Central Americans.

Graph 3: Percent of Single Adults Processed Under Title 42 (March 2020 - August 2021)
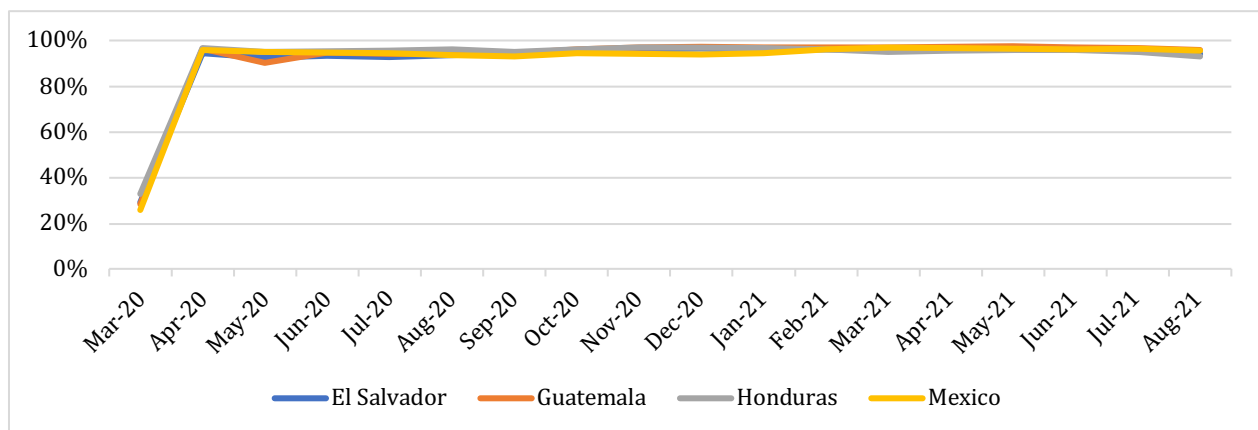
To count the number of unique individuals leaving Mexico and Central America means estimating how many people have attempted to recross the border (i.e., the recidivism rate). Unsurprisingly, some of the individuals expelled under Title 42, or removed to their countries of origin under Title 8, attempt to re-enter the United States. In CBP's monthly data, these repeat crossings are counted as additional encounters. For example, if the same person attempts to cross the border five times, they are listed in the data as five separate encounters.

Counting the numbers of recidivists is tricky. In February 2021, the Border Patrol estimated that "between March 20, 2020 and February 4, 2021, 38 percent of all encounters involved individuals who have been

apprehended more than once."[4] However, this percent is the rate for all encounters, including not just people who were removed or expelled to Mexico or their countries of origin, but also people released into the interior of the United States, where there would be no recidivism. To calculate unique individuals, the model uses a different recidivism rate for each demographic category.

I inputted my estimates at the top of the model assumptions (you can download the model and input your own estimates) and calculated that in August 2021, more than 57,000 Mexican and Central American encounters were repeat crossings. In other words, CBP encountered around 75,000 unique Mexican and Central Americans. This is in addition to another estimated 10,900 Mexicans and Central Americans who entered the United States undetected during the month. In total, in August 2021, the model estimates that nearly 85,000 unique Mexicans and Central Americans arrived at the border.

This answers the first question of how many individuals are arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border but does not answer the question of how many people are leaving their homes across the region. To answer this question requires using data from Mexico's National Institute of Migration (INM) and Mexico's Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR).

Since October 2017, INM has deported nearly 380,000 Salvadoran, Honduran, and Guatemalan migrants as they crossed through Mexico.[5] Many, if not most, of these individuals will immediately re-enter Mexico in another attempt to reach the United States. However, others will remain in Central America or settle on Mexico as their final destination. To calculate the number that never reach the U.S.-Mexico border, the model separates INM deportation numbers into categories (families, unaccompanied minors, and adults) and estimates each group's rate of successfully re-crossing Mexico.

Additionally, for those Central Americans who stay in Mexico, a portion will seek refugee status in the country. From January 2017 through August 2021, COMAR granted refugee status or complementary protection to 37,257 people from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. (Complementary protection is offered to individuals who do not qualify for refugee status but who COMAR deems could be at risk if returned to their country of origin.) The model assumes that the vast majority of people who receive these protections remain within Mexican territory.

By adding INM and COMAR estimates to CBP data, the model can produce a more complete picture of regional migration dynamics. It shows that current numbers of unique Mexican and Central American individuals are lower than during the May 2019 peak, but this latest migration surge is lasting longer. Since March 2021, there have been six months (and counting) of more than 75,000 unique individuals a month.

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[4] "CBP Announces January 2021 Operational Update," U.S. Customs and Border Protection, February 10, 2021, https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/national-media-release/cbp-announces-january-2021-operational-update.
[5] "Boletines Estadísticos," Unidad de Política Migratoria, accessed August 16, 2021, http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es/PoliticaMigratoria/Boletines_Estadisticos.
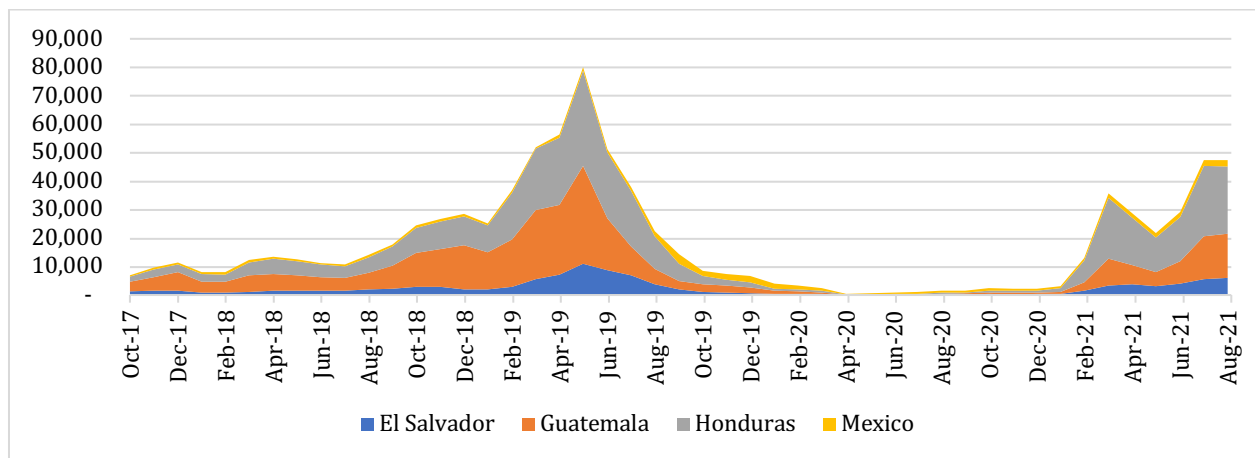
Graph 4: Estimated Unique Individual Emigration (October 2017 – August 2021)
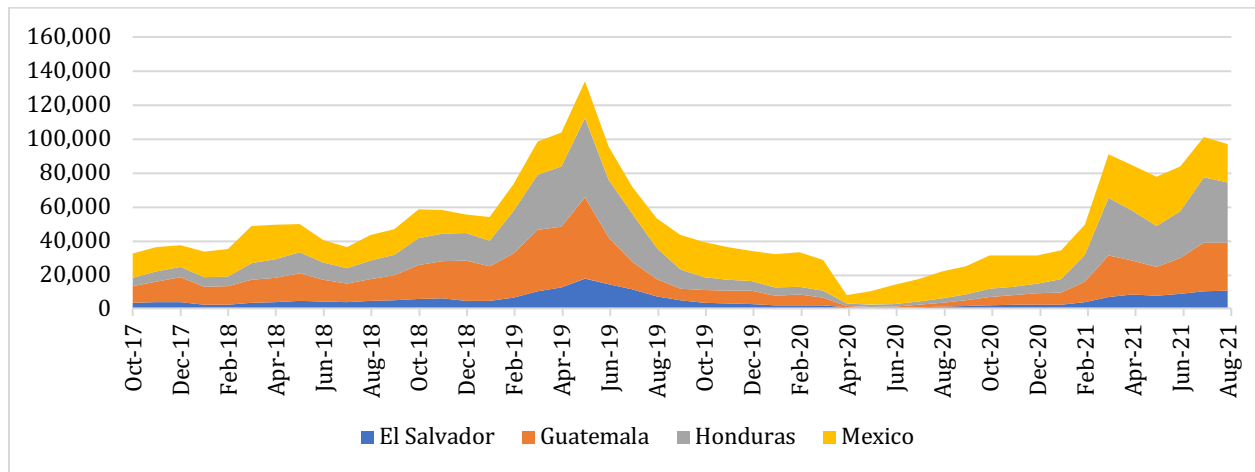
Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection Data; Mexico's INM and COMAR Data

In August 2021, Central American and Mexican families led migration numbers, with nearly 24,000 Honduran families leaving their communities. These numbers remain lower during the May 2019 spike, when nearly 33,500 Honduran families left the country. However, they are the highest levels since the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) spread across the entire border during summer 2019, and since the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020.
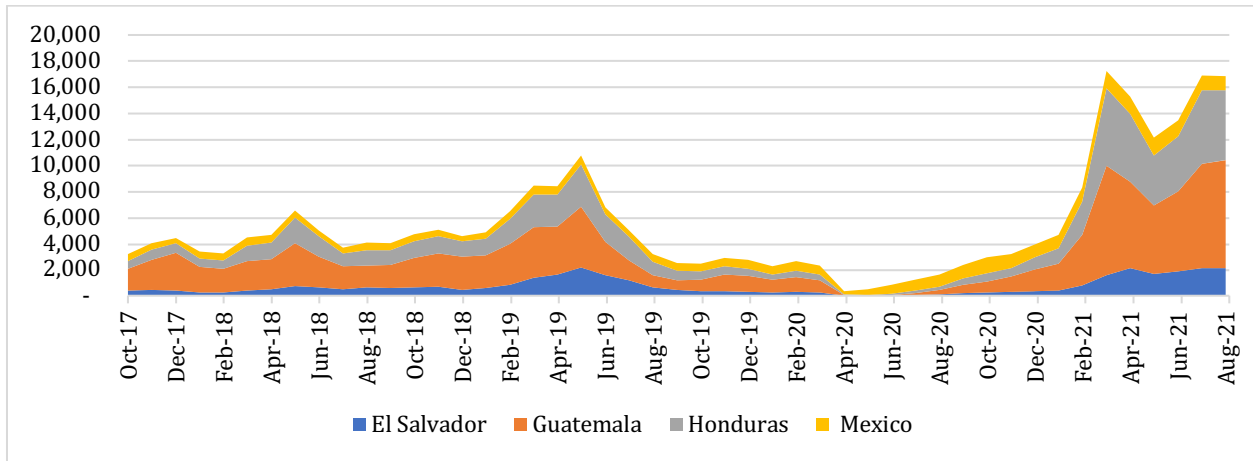
Graph 5: Total Unique Family Emigration (October 2017 – August 2021)

Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection Data; Mexico's INM and COMAR Data

In March 2021, the total number of Central American and Mexican unaccompanied minors reached the highest level in recent years, led by large numbers of Guatemalans youths. This fiscal year's numbers have already surpassed previous spikes. During the 2014 fiscal year, CBP encountered 68,541 unaccompanied minors at the border; while so far in fiscal year 2021, CBP has encountered 126,273 unaccompanied minors. However, despite their high numbers, unaccompanied minors constitute only 17 percent of all unique individuals leaving Central America this fiscal year.

Graph 6: Total Unique Unaccompanied Minor Emigration (October 2017 - August 2021)

Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection Data; Mexico's INM and COMAR Data

During this fiscal year, single adults have made up 49 percent of all Central Americans and Mexicans leaving their homes and heading north. Mexican single adults make up the largest portion, pushing up overall border numbers. However, CBP's data on single adults look even more dramatic. This is because single adults have the highest recidivism rate, which has only increased amid CBP's enforcement of Title 42. (Title 42 removed any re-crossing prosecutions or consequences, which have been shown to lower recidivism rates.[6])

Graph 7: Total Unique Single Adult Emigration (October 2017 - August 2021)
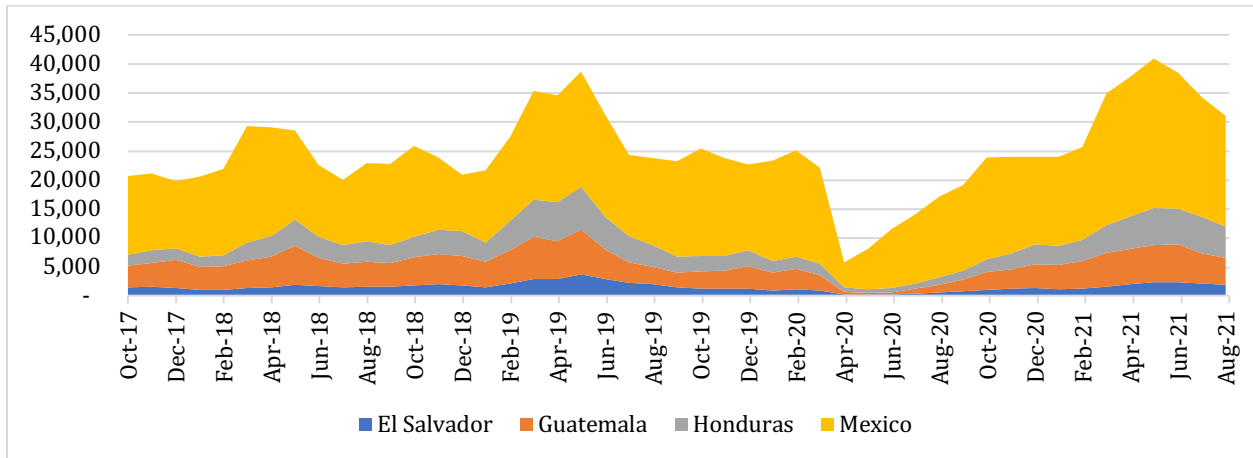
Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection Data; Mexico's INM and COMAR Data

For simplicity's sake, this model has left out certain factors. Most notably, it has not tried to calculate the effects of specific policies such as MPP, the Asylum Cooperative Agreement with Guatemala, or the individuals who were processed through the Prompt Asylum Claim Review (PACR) and the Humanitarian Asylum Review Process (HARP). Instead, it bundles these individuals into the overall numbers and the estimated recidivism rate. However, these additions would benefit a future model,

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[6] Samuel Bazzi, Sarah Burns, Gordon Hanson, Bryan Roberts, and John Whitley, "Deterring Illegal Entry: Migrant Sanctions and Recidivism in Border Apprehensions," February 2019, http://www.bu.edu/econ/files/2020/01/BBHRW_Manuscript.pdf.

particularly if CBP publishes more detailed demographic data on the individuals placed into those programs.

Migration is dynamic and complex and refuses to fit neatly into a model. This model is not the final answer but rather a starting point to estimate and think through current migration dynamics. The model uses my assumed rates, and readers may have their own differing assumptions. Readers can and should adjust the assumptions at the top of the model as they see fit. It will always be impossible to calculate exact migration numbers. However, by modeling migration, we can better understand who is migrating, how policies affect their migration, and what published border numbers can and cannot explain.