

SEARCHING FOR DURABLE SOLUTIONS



INTEGRATION AND REINTEGRATION IN THE NORTH OF CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO

Integration and reintegration in the North of Central America and Mexico: "Searching for durable solutions"

In line with the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016) and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework - preceded by the Brazil Plan of Action (2014) and the San José Action Statement (2016) - countries in Central America and Mexico have committed to implement the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS, according to its Spanish acronym), in order to address the phenomenon of forced displacement in the region.¹ The MIRPS brings together initiatives seeking to create durable solutions, through which people with protection needs can find security and stability, and lead a normal life, either through: **voluntary repatriation to their country of origin, local integration in the country of asylum, or resettlement in another country.**²

In theory, asylum seekers, refugees, people with international protection needs and deported persons³ in the North of Central America (NCA) and Mexico are guaranteed access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment and adequate housing, which together should enable them to meet their protection needs. In practice, access

to these rights is restricted by multiple factors, including a lack of public policies and political will facilitating access to civil documentation, efficient regularization processes, or information so that both people and institutions are aware of existing rights and legislation. Stigma and discrimination due to xenophobia, as well as high rates of violence and crime also negatively affect the integration of asylum seekers and the reintegration of deportees. Vicious cycles of displacement, poverty, debt and protection risks are repeated.

As generalised violence continues to affect the NCA and Mexico, migration policies increasingly restrict the right to seek asylum, and the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbates humanitarian needs, this snapshot seeks to identify the options for integration or reintegration in the sub-region, and asks whether durable solutions are readily available for asylum seekers, refugees, people with international protection needs and deportees.

Key messages

- 1 Deported persons face barriers to finding jobs, returning to school, and re-establishing normal lives. Returns to the NCA through **deportations** cannot be considered a durable solution.
- 2 Asylum seekers, refugees and deportees face multiple barriers to **integration and reintegration**, including generalised violence, loss of support networks, stigma and discrimination.
- 3 The few **reintegration programmes available for deportees** are usually only provided in metropolitan areas and are mainly focused on providing employment opportunities, while very few provide the comprehensive psychosocial support necessary for reintegration.
- 4 **Resettlement** is a durable solution that is out of reach for the vast majority of people with protection needs in the region (in 2019, out of the 3'757 people with protection needs identified under the Protection Transfer Agreement mechanism, only 18% were resettled).⁴



This is the tenth snapshot on the protection situation in the North of Central America and Mexico; an initiative of the REDLAC Regional Protection Group for the NCA, led by the Norwegian Refugee Council, and supported by AECID and ECHO. The analysis is based on semi-structured interviews with 25 humanitarian organisations and academic institutions working in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Mexico, as well as monitoring of official statistics, press, and academic studies. The document includes inputs from various organisations in the Protection Group, but does not reflect messages approved by each organisation.

A general update on the protection crisis

In the first six months of 2020:



From January to July, 1'429 homicides were reported, 778 cases less than the same period of the previous year.³⁰



As lockdown measures were lifted, 235 homicides were reported, an increase of 30% compared to the month of March, during lockdown.³¹



From January to June, 596 complaints of domestic violence were reported, 26% more than the same period of the previous year.³² 1'520



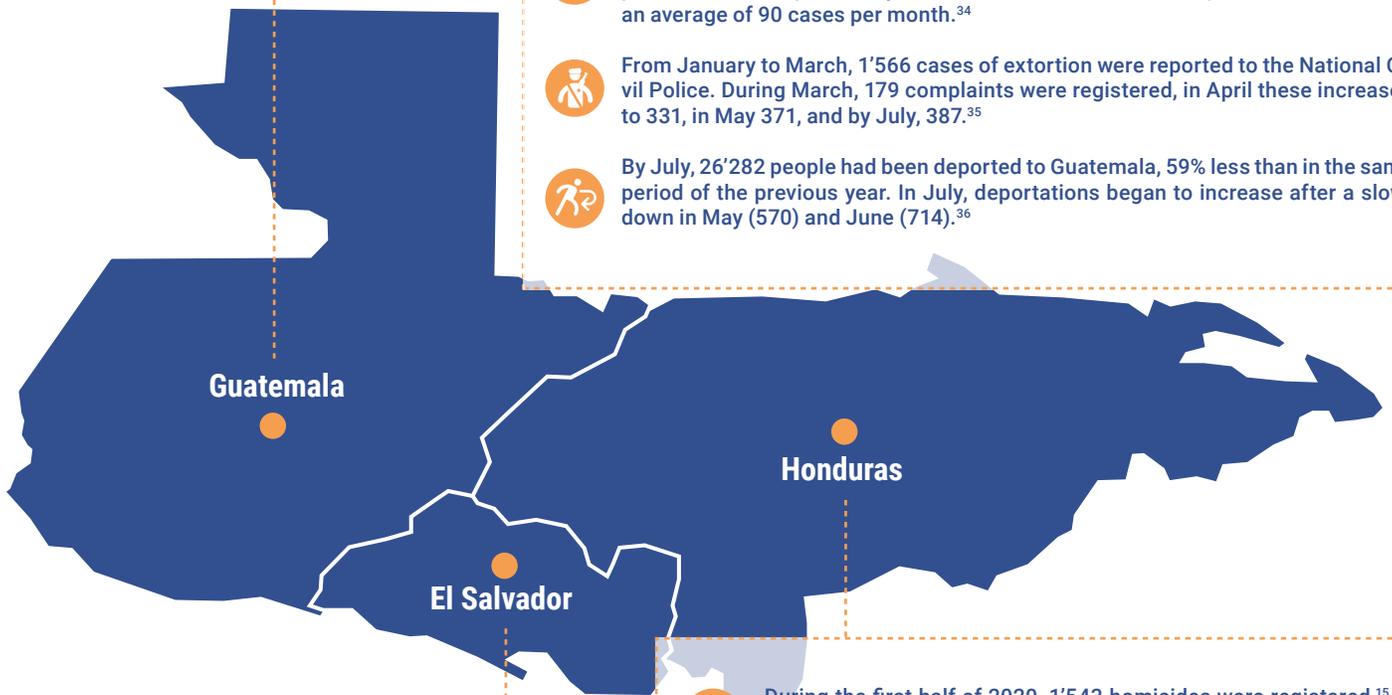
By July, 819 Isabel-Claudina Alerts were activated for missing women, 31% fewer cases than during the same period in 2019. Despite mobility restrictions due to the pandemic, from April to July the number of alerts for missing women remained at an average of 90 cases per month.³⁴



From January to March, 1'566 cases of extortion were reported to the National Civil Police. During March, 179 complaints were registered, in April these increased to 331, in May 371, and by July, 387.³⁵



By July, 26'282 people had been deported to Guatemala, 59% less than in the same period of the previous year. In July, deportations began to increase after a slow-down in May (570) and June (714).³⁶



From January to July 2020, 698 homicides were registered, a reduction of 60% compared to the same period in 2019.⁵ The daily average number of homicides for the first half of 2020 was 4.3.⁶



By July, the Office of the Attorney General registered more than 869 disappearances, an average of five cases per day, a reduction of 50% compared to the same period of 2019.⁷



From March to May 29'330 cases of rape were reported; averaging one attack happening every seven hours.⁸



From January to July, 7'783 people were deported, a decrease of 66% compared to the same period in 2019.⁹



During the first half of 2020, 1'543 homicides were registered.¹⁵ By June, 40 homicides were reported per 100,000 inhabitants,¹⁶ with an average of 17 homicides per day.¹⁷



By June, more than 40'000 attacks against women were registered.¹⁸



A Garífuna community in Tela, Atlántida, reported the kidnapping of three people in July. Between 2008 and 2019, 105 acts of violence against the Garífuna people were recorded, including threats, criminalization, displacement, sexual violence, disappearances and judicial harassment.¹⁹



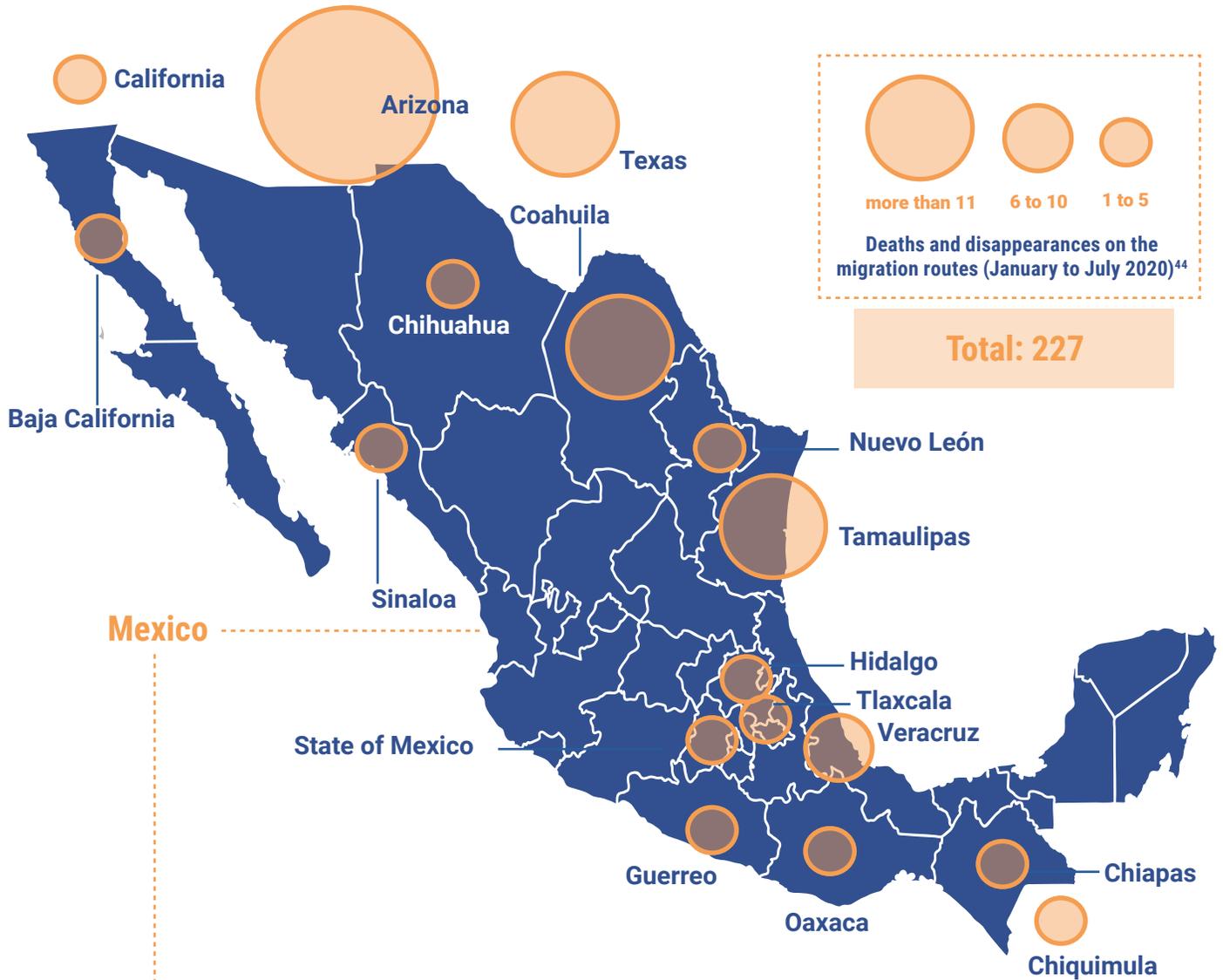
A MS13 clique was discovered to have configured a sophisticated system of video surveillance and territorial control through telephones and computers in the Ocotillo and Suazo neighbourhoods of San Pedro Sula.²⁰



In June, a caravan of 40 migrants bound for the United States left the departments of Francisco Morazán, Cortés and Atlántida.²¹



From January to July, 25'500 people were deported back to Honduras, a decrease of 64% compared to the same period in 2019.²²



Mexico



From January to July, a total of 25'601 homicides and femicides took place (of which 549 were femicides). This is a 4% decrease in homicides and a 5% increase in femicides in comparison to 2019.⁴¹



15'093 people remain on metering lists at eleven border crossing points, waiting to cross the United States-Mexico border. The waiting time is between 5 and 11 months.⁴²



103'644 Mexicans were deported from the USA.⁴³

Apprehensions at the US/Mexico Border (fiscal year up until July 2020)				
Nacionality	Unaccompanied minors	Travelling with family	Single adults	Total
El Salvador	1'820	3'866	7'134	12'820
Guatemala	6'964	9'927	20'347	37'238
Honduras	3'460	9'381	18'423	31'264
Total	12'246	23'174	45'904	81'322

Changes to migration policies

2020	16th of June	The US Departments of Justice and Homeland Security announced that MPP hearings would be postponed until the 20th of July. ⁴⁶
	19th of June	The US Supreme Court blocked the Trump administration from ending the DACA programme. ⁴⁷
	26th of June	ICE was ordered by a U.S. District Judge of California to release minors held in immigration custody for more than 20 days, due to the risks of the spreading of Covid-19. ⁴⁸
	1st of July	The T-MEC Agreement, which aims to generate jobs to reduce migration, between Mexico, the United States and Canada came into force. ⁴⁹
	1st of July	The Trump administration's third country asylum rule (stipulating that people had to seek asylum at the first safe country en route) was overturned. ⁵⁰ As such, people who previously lost their case in court can request asylum again. ⁵¹
	7th of July	First meeting between the presidents of Mexico and the US on the T-MEC Agreement. ⁵²
	28th of July	ICE was yet to release minors in custody in immigration detention centres, nor had released children along with their parents. ⁵³

	Asylum requests in Mexico, by nationality (Jan-July, 2020) ⁴⁵	Comparison with Jan-July 2019
Honduras	6'965	-77%
El Salvador	2'032	-78%
Guatemala	1'444	-62%
Total	10'441	-76%

Covid-19 in the North of Central America

El Salvador

- By the middle of the year, Covid-19 cases continued to increase, exceeding 300 daily cases, and the recovery level remained at 56%, 41% of cases remained active, and the mortality rate was at 3%. Quarantine centres sheltered 1'293 people, of which 2% were children, 87% adults and 6% older adults.¹⁰ Approximately 15% of health personnel were estimated to be infected.¹¹ The country had the highest mortality rate (9%) for doctors in Central America with 9% (currently at 5% in Honduras and 2% in Guatemala). Up until the 19th of July, 26 doctors were reported to have died from the virus.¹²
- According to the OCHA July Situation Report: *"Pension fund associations documented a 14% reduction in jobs, which according to the Salvadoran Chamber of Industry and Construction is the equivalent of 28,000 jobs"*¹³
- A new hospital was inaugurated on the 21st of June; built due to the need for specialized healthcare for Covid-19 patients. However, at the facilities lacked the necessary equipment and technical staff. Three planned phases to increase capacity to 2'400 beds were expected to be completed by the end of 2020. Relatives of Covid-19 patients have reported that hospitals were losing donated plasma, due to the lack of specific areas for receiving and extracting blood plasma during weekends.¹⁴

Honduras

- 59% of Covid-19 tests obtained a negative result and 41% positive; the mortality rate is 3%.²³
- Hospitals are operating beyond capacity, with occupancy rates between 94% and 145%. By mid-July, 281 people were isolated in 32 Temporary Isolation Centres.²⁵
- Information, assistance and monitoring for sexual and reproductive health were reduced and adapted to teleconsultation services. Doctors Without Borders warned that the availability and distribution of contraceptives had been reduced, and cost around \$20, prohibitive for most people with an average daily income of around \$2.75.²⁶
- Approximately 500 migrants from Cuba, Haiti and various African countries heading north remained blocked in Choluteca, near the border with Nicaragua, due to Covid-19 movement restrictions, and began their attempt to leave the country in early June.²⁷
- From March 16 to July 28, 434 protests were registered in 72 municipalities; 35% demanding access to food; 17% demanding the right to return to work and 17% access to social protection.²⁸
- In the absence of government assistance, the Lenca de Reitoca indigenous communities in Francisco Morazán self-organized to collect medical, biosecurity, oxygen and food supplies for families in need.²⁹

Guatemala

- By July there were 55'270 accumulated registered cases, 2'068 deaths with a mortality rate of 12.9 deaths per 100'000 inhabitants, and a 3.9% fatality rate, the highest in Central America.³⁷
- 38 Nicaraguans with international protection needs were stranded on the border between Guatemala and Honduras, waiting for an entry permit from the Nicaraguan government, a requirement from the Honduran government to be able to transit through Honduran territory.³⁸
- According to an exploratory study by the Universidad Panamericana in Guatemala, 24% of interviewees said they had a family member who would migrate after the Covid-19 crisis.³⁹
- Since the start of the pandemic in Guatemala, 166 families have been deported from the United States and Mexico (March and April 2020), made up of 116 women, 49 men and 205 girls, boys and adolescents.⁴⁰

1 Why are durable solutions needed in the NCA and Mexico?

A brief historical overview of forced displacement in the NCA offers insight into the obstacles that people on the move have to accessing durable solutions in the region.

Central American migration (1980s - 2010s)⁵⁴

El Salvador

The internal armed conflict (1979-1992) led to the displacement of more than one million people and was the origin of significant migration to the United States. 300'000 refugees fled to Honduras in the late 1980s and early 1990s. By 2017, 30% of the total Salvadoran population of working age lived in the United States (760'000 people were living undocumented).⁵⁵

Guatemala

Up to 1.5 million Guatemalans had to leave their homes as a result of the internal armed conflict between 1954 and 1996. This displacement was both internal and cross-border, mainly to Mexico.⁵⁶ An estimated 200'000 Guatemalans fled to Mexico, where they settled in informal refugee camps at the border. Others continued to the United States; by 2010 there were 850'000 Guatemalans residing in the United States, the largest foreign population in the country.⁵⁷

Honduras

Migration trends of people leaving Honduras to the United States began in 1980 as a result of political crises and natural hazards. In 1988, an estimated 1.5 million Hondurans were displaced as a result of Hurricane Mitch. By 2017, 10% of the Honduran population was estimated to reside in the United States. Hondurans living abroad send more than 4'000 million dollars per year in remittances.⁵⁸

The situation in 2020:

Displacements and asylum applications on the rise

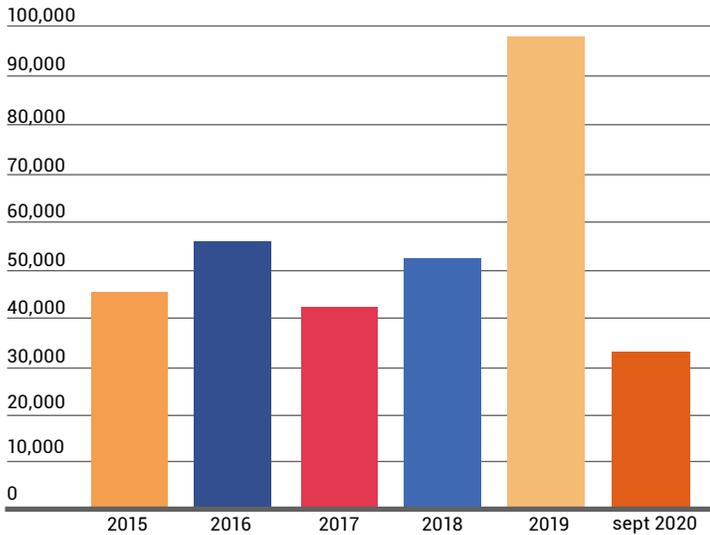
By the end of the 2000s, the demographic profile of Central Americans migrating to Mexico and the United States began to change, as higher numbers of families, women and unaccompanied children began to make the journey north.⁵⁹ The proportions of these groups has tripled in the last decade. For example, in 2013, only 4% of apprehensions at the US-Mexico border were of family units, by 2019 they rose to 56%.⁶⁰ In 2018, the US authorities registered 22'327 arrests of Guatemalan minors (while in 2009 1'115 were registered), 10'913 Honduran minors (in 2009, 968 arrests) and 4'949 Salvadoran minors (1'221 in 2009). Unaccompanied children and women are exposed to multiple protection risks and systematic violations of their human rights.⁶¹

The numbers of Salvadorans, Guatemalans and Hondurans apprehended by the US Border Patrol have also increased gradually since 2012, reaching their highest figure in 2019 at 590'000.⁶² Furthermore, Mexico and the United States have registered a substantial increase in asylum requests from Guatemalans, Hondurans and Salvadorans as a consequence of criminal violence, insecurity, severe droughts and political instability.

Migration and displacement from the North of Central America to Mexico and the United States is the product of rational decision-making, and the result of various structural drivers: the lack of opportunities for young people, extreme poverty, violence in the countries of origin, as well as in neighbouring countries, and the presence of social and family networks in destination countries.⁶³ While most people know the dangers and risks of the migration route, it often remains the only opportunity for people to improve their socioeconomic situation or to protect their families.⁶⁴

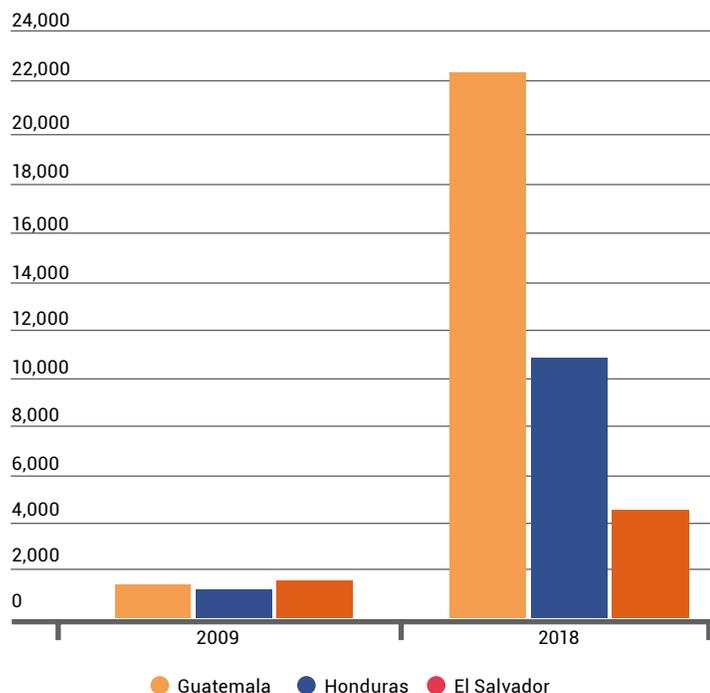
Total number of apprehensions at the US southern border (January 2015 to September 2020)

Data from the US Customs and Border Protection



Number of arrests of minors by the US authorities (2009 to 2018)

Data from the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH), Labour Integration of Central American Migrants in Mexico, 2019.



Nicaraguan and Venezuelan displacement in the region

In addition to these growing needs are those of people of other nationalities on the move. In the last two years, more than 100'000 Nicaraguans have fled violence and insecurity due to political and social unrest.⁶⁵ Although 77'000 people have fled to Costa Rica, thousands of people have gone north to request protection. According to the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance, in the first months of 2018, 566 Nicaraguans applied for refugee status in Mexico, 900% more than the previous year. Additionally, the number of Venezuelan asylum seekers has continued to increase: from January to September 2018, Venezuelans accounted for 25% of all asylum applications in Mexico.⁶⁶

A shrinking protection space

The characteristics of migration flows depend to a great extent on the migration policies implemented by the governments in the region. Since the end of the 20th century, the United States has based its immigration policy on a national security and border control approach, focused on increasing migration control and mass deportations of both of seeking to enter the national territory as well as those already living in it. Mexico has also implemented similar actions, focusing on both those looking to settle in Mexico, as well as those heading to the US. These state actions attempting to stop migration are known as 'externalisation measures': *"state efforts to prevent asylum seekers from entering their jurisdictions or territories, or to make them legally inadmissible without individually considering the merits of their protection claims"*.⁶⁷

Over the last few years, the United States has adopted a series of measures related to its asylum system. In January 2019, the Migrant Protection Protocols came into force, stipulating that people entering the United States and wishing to seek asylum (regardless of how they entered the country) must be returned to Mexico to wait for the duration of their asylum processes in US immigration courts.⁶⁸ On the other hand, between July and September 2019, the United States signed three 'Asylum Cooperation Agreements' (ACAs) with the countries of the North of Central America, with the aim of sending asylum seekers arriving at the US border to Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador to seek protection there.⁶⁹ These 'Safe Third Country' agreements formalise the transfer of asylum seekers from a State receiving asylum seekers to a third State, to process their applications and offer protection (this third State is must not be the country of origin of the asylum seekers and must be considered safe).⁷⁰ Meanwhile, in September 2019, the US Supreme Court authorized the Trump administration to apply a new policy on its southern border restricting the right to request asylum in the US. According to this rule, people arriving



Photo: Ingebjørg Kårstad/NRC/2019

at the US border from a third country must have previously requested asylum in the first safe country that they passed through, effectively prohibiting asylum applications to people who passed through another country on their way to the US (however, in July 2020 this rule was overturned by a federal judge in Washington DC).⁷¹ Furthermore, in August 2020, it was estimated that 15'093 registered asylum seekers were on the waiting lists in 11 Mexican border cities waiting to cross the border and apply for asylum.⁷²

This hardening of migration policies has led to an increase in the cost of irregular migration, both economically and in terms of the protection risks that the journey implies. Faced with the lack of safe routes through which to seek asylum or migrate regularly, Central Americans are faced with two options for travelling north: either guided by a human trafficker, or by travelling alone and exposing themselves to greater risks and uncertainty. Traffickers, also known as "coyotes" or "polleros", are considered "logistics managers" with the knowledge, resources and contacts needed to avoid the dangers associated with the migration route.⁷³ The militarization of the border between Mexico and Guatemala in recent years has increased the costs of coyote services. In El Salvador the costs of these services are around 11'500 USD, which tend to be paid through small deposits made to different accounts. Guatemalans are often also forced to use the "services" of traffickers, who on average charge between 5'000 to 10'000 USD.⁷⁴ In Honduras, these can cost up to 12'000 USD. Coyotes often mislead migrants, for example by promising people that if they were to travel with minors they would be more likely to be granted asylum.⁷⁵

These high costs related to irregular migration often drive people into debt, in order to be able to afford the trip.⁷⁶ As people are unable to re-pay the fees for these "services", they lose their assets and are evicted from their homes, or are sexually harassed and abused. In some cases, as men risk the journey, their partners left behind are abused to "cover the costs" of the fees.⁷⁷ Deportees are particularly affected by this accumulated debt, as upon their return may face an even more precarious situation than before initially leaving.⁷⁸

2 Who and how many people need durable solutions in the region?

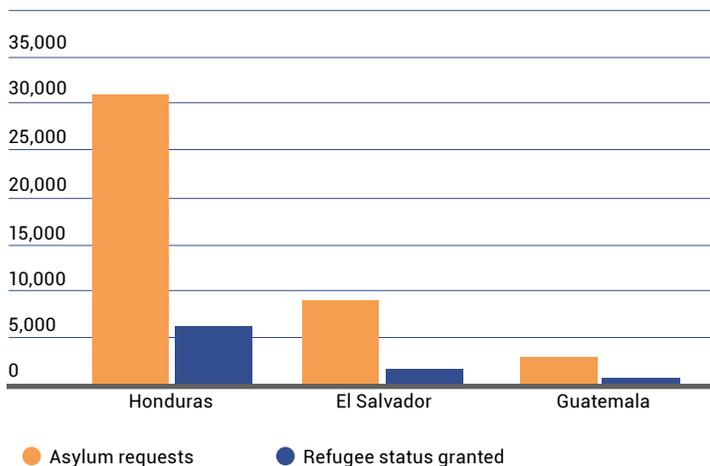
This section outlines the profiles of people forced to leave their countries of origin in the North of Central America due to violence, demonstrating not only the diversity and magnitude of those in need, but also the barriers that people face in accessing education, employment and housing: all of the requirements required in order to be able to live with dignity whilst displaced. In Mexico and Guatemala, asylum seekers, refugees and people with international protection needs are the main profiles in need of durable solutions, while in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, deportees are the main profile analysed.

Asylum seekers

This profile refers to people who, having left their countries of origin due to violence and/or due to a well-founded fear of persecution, have crossed one or several international borders and requested international protection. In 2019 the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) received a total of 43'026 requests for international protection from people from the North of Central America (70% from Honduras, 21% from El Salvador and 9% from Guatemala), yet resolved only 27% of requests, granting asylum to between 47 and 77% of cases, depending on nationalities.⁷⁹

Total refugee applications and positive responses in 2019 by COMAR, according to nationality

Data from the Mexican Commission for Aid to Refugees.



In 2019, 494 asylum applications were also made in Guatemala, according to data from the Office of International Migration Relations (ORMI), (an increase of 112% compared to 2018),⁸⁰ but refugee status was only granted to nine people.⁸¹ Honduras and Costa Rica have also received asylum seekers from Nicaragua, due to the displacement of around 100,000 people forced to flee the political and social crisis.⁸² With the signing of the Safe Third Country agreements between the countries of the North of Central America and the US, asylum applications are expected to increase.

People seeking asylum in the United States, returned under the MPP programme to Mexico

While people under this profile have requested asylum in the US under the relevant legal procedures, they have been returned to Mexico and therefore must remain in Mexican territory whilst their request is processed by US authorities. According to Syracuse University, during the 2019 fiscal year, the US received 35'233 asylum applications from people from the NCA (47% from Honduras, 36% from Guatemala, and 17% from El Salvador) who returned to Mexico to await their asylum processes under the MPP programme. During the 2020 fiscal year so far, 9'780 applications have been received, 54% from Honduras, 27% from Guatemala and 19% from El Salvador. Although there are no official Mexican figures, it is estimated that to date there are between 15 and 19'000 people in Mexico under this programme.⁸³

People with International Protection Needs

This profile is made up of people who left their places of origin due to violence, had to cross one or more international borders, yet are not necessarily able to request international protection. It also includes people with economic, personal and socio-cultural reasons for leaving their countries of origin, but who suffered from human rights violations and acquired protection needs whilst on the move or upon arrival.

In Mexico, in 2019 the Documentation Network of Migrant Defence Organizations (REDODEM), a network made up of 23 organisations assisting migrants in 13 states of the country, registered 26'383 people of various profiles and vulnerabilities who used their facilities whilst in transit or upon arrival in the country.⁸⁴ In January



Photo: European Union/ECHO/A. Aragon 2016

to March 2019, 93% of people came from the North of Central America and from April to December, 84%. While from January to March, 68% of people interviewed said they were going to the US and 27% said they would settle on Mexico, these proportions changed to 58% and 38% respectively from April to December.⁸⁵ The latter percentage rise since 2018;⁸⁶ matches other sources that show that between 2013 and 2018 there has been a significant increase in Honduran migrants (from 2% to 21%) and Salvadorans (from 13% to 28%) who indicated that Mexico was their country of destination at the time of being deported.⁸⁷

Again according to the REDODEM, from January to March, 14% of people from the North of Central America interviewed said they had left their homes due to violence, as did 27% from April to December. 89% said they were afraid to return home (a percentage that remained the same for children and adolescents, and rose to 93% for women). Likewise, 85% said they were aware of the possibility of requesting international protection, 74% knew how to do so, 44% said they were interested in seeking protection, and 19% had already done so (93% in Mexico and 6% in the United States).⁸⁸

People deported to the NCA

This profile is made up of migrants, displaced people and people with protection needs who were deported to their countries of origin during their migration process, either during transit, upon arrival or even once settled in destination countries. This snapshot covers people returned to the NCA through deportation,⁸⁹ and does not include analysis of persons who return voluntarily or by themselves, or persons transferred under the ACAs migration agreements. Deportations have risen significantly over recent years, in part due to the restrictive migration policies in the region. From 2016 to June 2020, 857'470 people were deported to the North of Central America, 45% from the United States and 55% from Mexico, including 130'744 minors and 123'086 women over 18 years of

age. In this period, 2019 was the year with the highest number of deportations (251'778 people), a 28% increase compared to the previous year. Despite the mobility restrictions and the cases of people deported with Covid-19 from March to June 2020, 21'253 people were deported to the North of Central America.⁹⁰

According to IOM's definition of sustainable reintegration: *"reintegration can be considered sustainable when returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities, and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re)migration drivers. Having achieved sustainable reintegration, returnees are able to make further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than necessity."*⁹¹

In 2019, Honduras had 247'000 cumulative cases of internal displacement due to violence, Guatemala 242'000, El Salvador 454'000 and Mexico 345'000.⁹² In many of these cases, internal displacement is or can be a precursor to forced cross-border displacement.⁹³ Although internally displaced persons also leave their places of origin due to violence and require durable solutions to their displacement, the analysis of this snapshot is focused on people crossing international borders to reach their places of destination: asylum seekers, refugees, persons with international protection needs, and deportees.

Another profile not covered in this snapshot, but important to mention is that of cross-border economic migrants: people from the North of Central America who cross borders to work in neighbouring countries. From 2014 to 2019 the numbers of Guatemalan people seeking to work in Mexico and those returning to Guatemala, after having worked for more than a month in Mexico, have decreased.⁹⁴



Mexico: a country of origin, transit and destination

In Mexico, four migratory flows of people with vulnerabilities or needs converge⁹⁵: a) asylum seekers⁹⁶, b) asylum seekers in the US returned under the MPP programme⁹⁷, c) refugees⁹⁸; and, d) irregular migrants (either in transit or in the process of settlement).⁹⁹

The majority of **requests for asylum** are made in the south of Mexico, being the main entry point for asylum seekers from the NCA. As Mexican immigration law stipulates that people must remain in the same state where they submitted their applications for international protection, applicants usually remain "temporarily" in cities in the south of the country, until they receive refugee status and they can then move on. This process can take more than a year¹⁰⁰. However, in some cases people move to cities in the interior of the country, such as Mexico City, either transferred by authorities or on their own account.

Since the end of 2018, the numbers of people settled "temporarily" in the north of Mexico have increased, as a result of the implementation of the **MPP programme**.¹⁰¹⁻¹⁰² These people are at particular risk of Covid-19, since many live in shelters or overcrowded conditions in makeshift camps established in close to border ports.¹⁰³

When **refugees** obtain international protection they then disperse throughout the country, although many choose to live in cities with more employment opportunities, in particular those with factories, textile factories, assembly plants,¹⁰⁴ as well as attractive cities for trade and the possibility to exercise various professions¹⁰⁵: Tijuana (Baja California), Monterrey (Nuevo León), Saltillo (Coahuila), Guadalajara (Jalisco), Puebla (Puebla) and Mexico City.

Finally, **people with irregular migration status** are distributed across Mexico, generally on the different migration routes that lead to different cities in Mexico and to the border crossings with the United States, waiting to continue their journey or looking to settle permanently¹⁰⁶.

3 Integration, return, reintegration.

How accessible are these durable solutions in the region?

In El Salvador

Deportation to El Salvador and reintegration

Deportation from the United States and Mexico to El Salvador is a constant reality. **Over the last five years, 203'132 Salvadorans were deported.** The main departments that people return to are San Salvador, San Miguel, La Libertad, Santa Ana and Usulután.¹⁰⁷ In 2019, 30'610 adults were deported: 77% men and 23% women, as were 6'607 minors: 56% boys and 44% girls. 52% of these deportations were from the US and 48% from Mexico.¹⁰⁸ As of August 2020, 8'071 people have been deported from the United States and Mexico.¹⁰⁹

Returning to El Salvador can be a difficult psychological process for many, especially due to the social pressure of 'failure', compounded by the experience of any violence suffered during the displacement cycle or migration route.¹¹⁰ **Poverty, debts accumulated to finance the trip, and the lack of opportunities upon return can force people to become internally displaced or to attempt the route north again.** Salvadoran deportees report that their primary concerns are: to find a stable source of income allowing them to repay their debts; and to access psychosocial support to facilitate their social reintegration.¹¹¹

Furthermore, **threats to life and physical integrity are a constant risk to deportees.** From 2013 to 2019, Human Rights Watch recorded that 138 deportees had been killed after arriving in El Salvador. However these figures are likely to be a sub-estimation, as immigration status is not included as a variable in criminal investigations.¹¹² According to civil society organisations, many deportees report experiencing violence at home or in their communities of origin before embarking on the migration route.¹¹³ In a recent survey conducted by IOM in El Salvador with deportees, 12% of those surveyed affirmed that they were unable to return to their communities of origin, and 86% believed their lives were in danger.¹¹⁴

Related to these threats and risks, some Salvadoran deportees cannot return to their communities of origin, due to being at risk of the same violence that forced them to migrate or become displaced in the first place, including homicides, extortion and sexual violence. According to data from the General Directorate of Migration and Foreigners, between 2016 and 2017 only 60% of the Salvadoran population that fled the country as a result of violence were able to return to their places of origin.¹¹⁵

Another key concern for deportees is around access to housing. Owning a property does not necessarily mean that deportees are able to return home, as often people lose part of their assets whilst abroad.¹¹⁶ The vast majority of people have to stay temporarily with family and friends or rent accommodation.

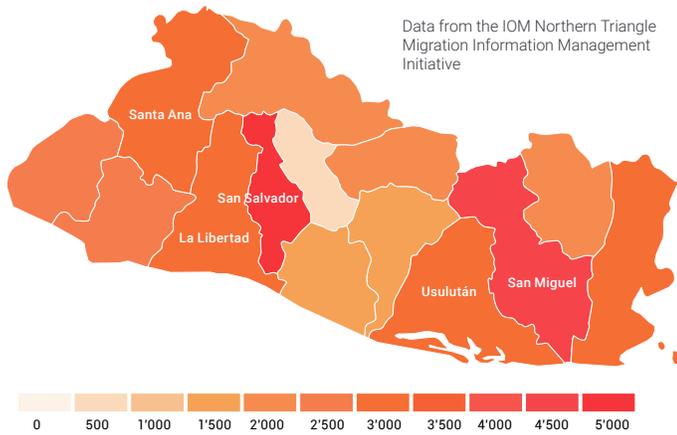
Without roots and social networks, people can find it particularly challenging to reintegrate back into El Salvador. **Discrimination against deportees, in particular against men with tattoos who are stigmatised as being involved with gangs, or people with no previous ties to communities, can be vulnerable to violent attacks.**¹¹⁷ On the other hand, people who have resided in the United States for many years have often forgotten the unwritten or unspoken norms that must be followed in order to avoid being a victim of crime. Furthermore, they can be seen as a source of wealth, increasing their exposure to extortion.¹¹⁸

"There have been cases of deportees with tattoos being murdered upon arrival, as they are seen as threats. Also, those arriving without a passport are at risk of being attacked, as criminal groups always ask for documentation before letting people enter the communities they control".

Humanitarian organisation in El Salvador

In the case of unaccompanied children, adolescents and their family groups, one of the main challenges is returning to the same circumstances that forced them to migrate. For those that do not have a suitable family environment to receive them, minors are put into state care, which according to some civil society actors, is equivalent to incarceration.¹¹⁹ Finally, there are many cases of family separation in which one of the family members is deported and the rest remain in the United States.¹²⁰ Deported children who have been denied the right to family reunification in the US have often suffered a heavy psychological impact, and are at risk of future displacement and migration.

Returned migrants in El Salvador by department (January 2019 to July 2020)



State efforts to promote the reintegration of deportees

Government programmes for deportees respond to immediate humanitarian needs upon arrival. Both the government and civil society organisations provide assistance to deportees in the 'Management of Migrant Care' Reception Centre, located in the La Chacra community in San Salvador, the only reception centre in the country.¹²¹ This space offers a reception process in which more than eleven government institutions, international cooperation and civil society organisations provide care to deportees (registration, humanitarian assistance, psychological first aid, basic healthcare and referrals to protection and re-integration services). A reception centre for deported children provides a more specialized level of care. The Salvadoran Institute for the Integral Development of Children and Adolescents (ISNA) is responsible for psychosocial care and reintegration, and the National Council for Children and Adolescents (CONNA) is responsible for the protection of children who have been victims of violence.¹²²

"The application of alternative care guidelines for deported children continues to be one of our main advocacy priorities and recommendations, but none of the public institutions have yet to take it up."

Humanitarian organisations in El Salvador

One of the principle institutional programmes is "El Salvador es tu Casa"; which connects the different actors providing care to deportees from the moment they enter the airport. The programme seeks to facilitate a comprehensive reintegration process with a gender perspective and special emphasis on people in vulnerable situations, as well as to implement a registration and care system that reduces the levels of re-victimization through a monitoring, evaluation and management system. According to data

from 2018, this programme benefited 4'538 people with income generation activities, entrepreneurship opportunities, support with job seeking, labour certification and technical training.¹²³ Nevertheless, in 2018, 24'039 adults were deported; so the impact of this programme, although positive, has only benefited 19% of the deported population.¹²⁴ **Other important initiatives are the six Migrant Assistance Offices led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, located in various departments, which provide services for the reintegration of returnees; as well as the five municipal offices for the care of migrants and their families.**

There are a series of cross-cutting challenges that make the reintegration of deportees difficult. Firstly, **the geographical location of these programmes prohibits both knowledge of and access about the services, and as such, deportees may face challenges to reintegration depending on their place of origin.** Secondly, in some cases deportees may be aware of these programmes but do not use them due to the costs associated with travelling to the offices, the dangers of making the journey, or a distrust in public institutions.¹²⁵

In the current context, **the main concern for 40% of people deported to El Salvador is employment.**¹²⁶ However, the government programmes on offer to access the labour market are focused on developing businesses and entrepreneurship, yet this is not adapted to the profiles of people arriving in El Salvador. Out of those recently surveyed, most male deportees with work experience had worked in agriculture and livestock (42%) and construction (26%), and out of the women surveyed, in cleaning (24%). Furthermore, deported persons who had acquired technical and language skills in the United States often face challenges in proving their skills or experience, without employment transcripts or certifications recognised in El Salvador.¹²⁷ IOM recently conducted a Livelihoods Survey of deportees in 2020, and found that only 5% had worked as professionals in the country that they had been deported from: 50% in basic operations and 18% in services and shops. Less than 20% of those surveyed spoke another language (for a small percentage of this population, call centres have provided job opportunities).¹²⁸

On the other hand, those returning to El Salvador on their own are not counted in official statistics, making it difficult to monitor and follow up in these programmes, and potentially leading to re-victimization and duplication of services by offering programs with similar objectives to the same people. Finally, **research shows that both psychosocial and educational support services must be strengthened in order to guarantee effective reintegration.**¹²⁹



Photo: Up Studio/NRC, 2019

Personal reintegration strategies for deportees

In 2018, various organisations of Central American deportees formed the Regional Alliance of Returned Migrants collective, with the aim of improving living conditions and job opportunities for deported persons.¹³⁰ In addition, the Salvadoran Association of Returnees (ALSARE) offers technical training, mental health support, training in social skills and citizenship rights in municipalities of the departments of Chalatenango, Cabañas, San Miguel, Usulután, Santa Ana and San Salvador. They coordinate with the Salvadoran Institute of Municipal Development, the Human Rights Ombudsman, Legal Guardianship, Conmigrantes, Swisscontact, Avina, and Insaforp. This collaboration is a good practice to highlight, as deported persons themselves work together to plan their own services.¹³¹

Civil society reintegration programmes

Civil society organisations have developed various initiatives and programmes to improve the social reintegration of deported Salvadorans. Good practices include:

- The Project '**Creation of Welcome Conditions for Returned Migrants**' in El Salvador, implemented by the Business Foundation for Social Action (FUNDEMAS), with the support of the Avina Foundation, has two main objectives: labour integration and the creation of a table intersectional dialogue in which civil society organisations, public institutions, companies, international cooperation and municipalities participate to create a support network for deportees. They have also worked on a roadmap for employment mediation with the private sector and the generation of job centres.¹³³
- Plan International also has a community care component; its decentralised offices administer **a vocational test to ensure the socio-economic insertion of deported people**.¹³⁴
- Save the Children have developed a project entitled "**Improving the care of returned children and adolescents and their families of the CANAF of San Miguel and Usulután**", which provides psychosocial care and technical advice to strengthen the capacities of the officials working at the centre. In addition, they have established coordination with the network of local actors to raise awareness on the issue of returned children, and to promote the elaboration of life plans for deportees in their communities, with the aim of developing opportunities and preventing irregular migration. Finally, Save the Children works together with the Intersectorial Student Commissions to form a 'welcome commission' in order to prevent rejection and discrimination towards returned children.¹³⁵
- **The Livelihood Project** led by the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants. Its objective is to accompany social reintegration processes with young deportees through job training activities and support for entrepreneurship ideas in the municipalities of Chalatenango, Usulután and San Salvador.¹³²

Despite these efforts, some civil society organisations, such as the Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development (FUSADES), point out that public employment policies currently hinder the insertion of deportees and can lead to people taking the migration route again.

They distinguish three barriers preventing deportees accessing the labour market:

- 1) discrimination due to prejudice (deportation is considered a failure and, therefore, represents a disadvantage);
- 2) the lack of recognition of foreign diplomas, professional training and skills;
- 3) an absence of contact networks that can facilitate obtaining a stable job.¹³⁶

In Honduras

Deportation to Honduras and reintegration

As in El Salvador, deportation from the United States and Mexico is an ongoing phenomenon in Honduras. **Over the last four years, 327'191 Honduran people were deported back to the country.** The main departments that people return to are Cortés, Francisco Morazán and Yoro. In 2019, 85'147 adults were deported: 81% were men, 19% women, and 24'038 were unaccompanied minors: 59% boys and 41% girls. The majority of deportees come from Mexico, however, over the last four years, the relative weight of the latter has reduced in favour of deportations from the United States: in 2016 approximately 72% of the deported people came from Mexico; in 2020, only 54%.¹³⁷

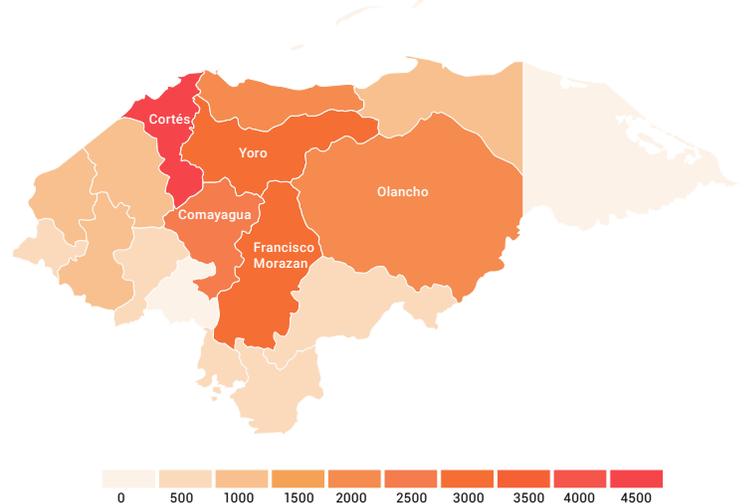
In terms of the protection risks that deportees face upon return to their places of origin, there is no official data on the number of deportees who have been killed upon arrival in the country. However, according to a compilation of press releases, 35 people deported in 2015 were killed just days after arriving in Honduras.¹³⁸

Reintegration support provided by the State

State institutions focus on three axes in their work to reintegrate deportees: overcoming poverty, ensuring family reunification, and protection. Programmes and projects available to deportees are carried out in coordination with civil society organisations.¹³⁹ **However, these public programmes only provide short-term relief and do not resolve the structural drivers of migration and displacement or promote long-term reintegration.**¹⁴⁰

Returned migrants in Honduras by department in 2019

Data from the IOM Northern Triangle Migration Information Management Initiative



"Honduras is long overdue to establish social and economic reintegration programmes for deportees. Specialised public policies must address structural causes."

Humanitarian organisation in Honduras

Deported Hondurans are received in three Centers for Assistance to Returned Migrants (CAMR). One is located in the municipality of Belén and is aimed at the care of children and families; the second is located in Omoa and is responsible for the reception of deportees who arrive via land from Mexico; and finally the centre located in La Lima receives people returned by air, especially from the US.¹⁴¹ In these centres, information is provided to deported persons about community integration programmes and psychological care, as well as entrepreneurship and other opportunities, such as credits, training and professional training.¹⁴²



Foto: Up Studio/NRC, 2019

In addition, a programme has been developed to establish **Departmental Units for Returned Migrants (UDAR)** and to strengthen the 16 existing Municipal Units for Migrants (UMAR) through coordination with the Association of Municipalities of Honduras, the Ministry of the Interior and IOM. These units coordinate integration activities for deportees, with the aim of reducing the need for people to migrate again.¹⁴³ However, these units currently lack the technical and economic resources to meet their objectives; in practical terms, they offer adequate immediate assistance, but do not provide protection services or promote sufficient livelihood strategies to ensure the integration of deportees.¹⁴⁴

The Solidarity Fund for Honduran Migrants (FOSMIH) financially supports work on economic reintegration, both for migrants in transit to their country of destination, as well as for deportees and people who have voluntarily returned home. It also finances entrepreneurship, social, educational and labour reintegration projects for deportees.¹⁴⁵ Additionally, the Norwegian Refugee Council, together with the Inter-Institutional Commission for the Protection of Persons Displaced by Violence (CIPPVD), is working to promote more agile and effective mechanisms for identifying livelihoods opportunities for deportees in need of protection and internally displaced persons.¹⁴⁶

However, **several challenges hinder the effectiveness and sustainability of these state programmes.** For example, many people distrust government services, and some initiatives are considered to be influenced by partisan political agendas of local governments.¹⁴⁷

During its visit to Honduras in August 2018, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights indicated the need for the Honduran State to provide effective reintegration programmes for deportees, promoting economic, socio-cultural and psychosocial support before, during and after the return. It recommended that Honduras should: *“Adopt a public policy that aims to guarantee an effective, human rights–centered reintegration process for returnee migrants, especially those in vulnerable situations and/or with a particular need for protection, such as children, victims of human trafficking, people with disabilities, LGBTI people, and people with medical needs.”*¹⁴⁸

Reintegration programmes provided by civil society

Civil society organisations monitor the situation of deportees and provide assistance in transportation, accommodation, hygiene, education, food equipment and, in certain cases, provide three months of cash transfers or a provisional fund to finance start-ups.¹⁴⁹

“At the community level, there are very few efforts to develop durable solutions with realistic measures for deportees. Some pilot projects are not adjusted to the reality of the context, demanding requirements and procedures that are out of reach for many deportees.”

Humanitarian organisation in Honduras

One of the main challenges that these organisations face is economic and programmatic sustainability, since financing this assistance lies on the shoulders of humanitarian actors, making it often short-term and on an ad-hoc basis.¹⁵⁰

Examples of best practices include:

- **FONAMIH** is made up of 22 civil society organisations and provides a space for dialogue and coordination for actions for migrant and deportees, provides seed capital and advises on the creation of companies. FONAMIH have also supported state programmes such as “Con Techo Digno” and “Con Chamba estamos mejor” that facilitated the creation of a job centre for young people through the Ministry of Labour. The initiatives are estimated to have benefitted approximately 50 people in Tegucigalpa and another 50 in the north of the country.¹⁵¹
- **The Assistance Programme for returnees with disabilities** is made up of a group of organisations linked to the Hermanas Scalabrinianas. They work on improving health, obtaining prostheses and providing training for their use. They also provide support for the creation of enterprises through the Solidarity Fund for Honduran Migrants (FOSMIH), in particular for subsistence ventures. They are estimated to have supported approximately 800 deported people with disabilities from 2009 to 2020.¹⁵²
- **The Genesis project** was aimed at preventing youth violence in San Pedro Sula, Choloma, La Lima, La Ceiba, Mosquitia and Tegucigalpa. Through financial support from USAID and the National Foundation for the Development of Honduras (FUNADEH), the project’s services were also extended to deportees. They provide entrepreneurship kits to deported migrants through coordination with mayors, the Mennonite Organizations and municipalities. These packages include work tools for young people to carry out their trade. In the short term, they aim to strengthen the employability of deported people through alliances through the Corporate Social Responsibility programmes of private companies.¹⁵³

In Guatemala

Deportation to Guatemala and reintegration

“[...] after registration, deportees leave the reception centre and are left to their own devices”¹⁵⁴

Since 2015, 494’041 Guatemalans were deported from the United States and Mexico, the majority to Huehuetenango, San Marcos and Quiche.¹⁵⁵

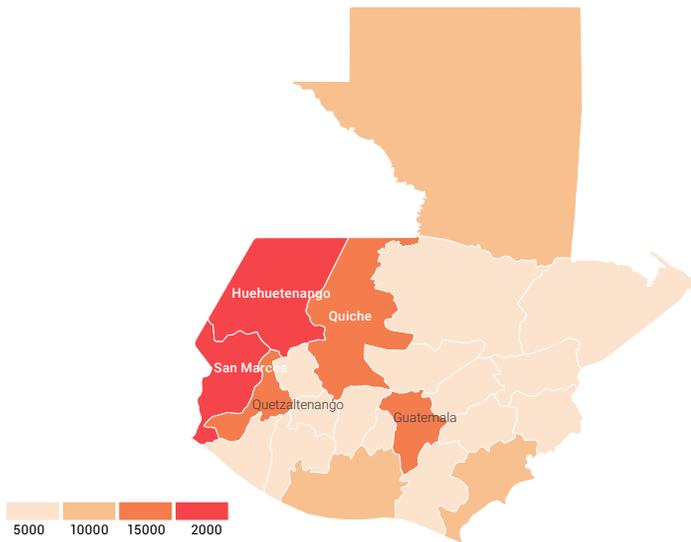
Various strategies have been implemented to care for deportees, focusing mainly on the moment of reception.¹⁵⁶ Reception centres and shelters for unaccompanied minors have been improved;¹⁵⁷ care protocols have been developed for families¹⁵⁸ and unaccompanied minors¹⁵⁹; free transportation has been set up to one of the departments with the highest rate of people deported from Guatemala City;¹⁶⁰ and work has been done to ensure the reestablishment of family communication and basic medical services in the Guatemalan Air Force. Most of these efforts have focused on deportees arriving by air. These actions have been achieved through inter-institutional coordination between non-governmental and governmental organisations.

For deportees, remaining in Guatemala is not always an option, as opportunities for integration and/or reintegration are limited. Furthermore, many deportees were never initially economically and socially integrated in the country, and therefore require an ‘integration’ rather ‘reintegration’ process.¹⁶¹ According to the EMIF Sur 2018 survey, **41% of the Guatemalan people deported by the US immigration authorities surveyed reported that they intended to return to the United States.** In addition, 5% of the Guatemalans surveyed had already been apprehended and deported twice, and 0.6 % had been so three or more times.¹⁶² . As such, a vicious circle of displacement is repeated, as people return to their communities to the same socioeconomic conditions that forced them to leave, and are forced or decide to attempt the migration route again.¹⁶³

According to a survey profiling migrants in transit, 7% of Guatemalans surveyed mentioned violence and insecurity as one of the reasons for migration,¹⁶⁴ yet in many cases people do not have the opportunity to request asylum before being deported.¹⁶⁵ In addition, reports and statistical data presented by the Guatemalan Migration Institute do not reflect whether deportees arriving had left the country for reasons of violence, and **at the governmental level there is no mechanism for detecting deported Guatemalans with protection needs**, meaning that they fall through the gaps of national protection systems.¹⁶⁶

Returned migrants in Guatemala by department in 2019

Data from the OIM Northern Triangle Migration Information Management Initiative



Children and adolescents have minimal options for reintegration in Guatemala, as those who return to their communities often have to go back to supporting their families just as they did before migrating, but now also dealing with the new emotional, social and economic burdens that deportation implies. **For many adolescents, migrating is a planned decision taken as a family; failing to succeed can leave young people with feelings of frustration and guilt in addition to further financial responsibilities.** In addition, traumatic situations, such as family separations by US immigration authorities, can cause sleep disorders, bed-wetting, rejection of parents and separation anxiety.¹⁶⁷

State efforts to promote the reintegration of deportees

In 2019, the MIRPS national plan was updated, and actions for protecting deportees were prioritised: “*Strengthening the Deported Reception Centers for the identification (in situ) of Guatemalan returnees who have protection needs and have been subject to violation of rights in the deportation process*”.¹⁶⁸ However, beyond the identification of protection needs and the strengthening of reception centres, Guatemala has not committed to ensuring the reintegration of deportees. **At the government level, reintegration efforts for deportees are scarce;** on occasion there are programmes that can support deportees but are not tailored to their specific needs.¹⁶⁹

The National Committee for Migration states that “*Guatemala lacks a Public Migration Policy that ensures a State response, rather than just a governmental one, guaranteeing that programmes are sustainable and long-term, and that the approach is inter-institutional*”.¹⁷⁰ Since the migration crisis of 2014, significant advances have been made for the care of children and deportees, with the creation of reception protocols and specific commissions.¹⁷¹

In general, existing government programmes serving deportees are isolated efforts and do not provide a comprehensive response to needs. Furthermore, whilst most of the strategies are centred on providing services to individuals, **some organisations believe it would be more strategic to work on community-wide strategies in the municipalities with the highest levels of people leaving.**¹⁷² Whilst also focussing on labour integration¹⁷³, **these programmes also lack the necessary psychosocial components for reintegration.**¹⁷⁴

The Ministry of Education has two Ministerial Agreements to facilitate access to the national educational system for returnees: ‘*Ministerial Agreement 696-2017*’ to validate foreign diplomas of deported Guatemalans, to enable them to continue their training in the National Educational System, and the ‘*Ministerial Agreement 2474-2018*’, to provide equivalent documentation for pre-primary, primary and secondary students for them to return to school.¹⁷⁵ However, the insertion and reintegration of children and adolescents in the national educational system goes beyond merely the enrolment of students in schools, it also requires the adaption of curriculums, and psychosocial support for children.

The Ministry of Social Welfare of the Presidency has two ‘*Quédate*’ (or ‘*Stay*’) Training Centres located in the departments of Sololá and Quiché, which: “*are in charge of providing formal and technical training services to returned adolescents and to those at risk of migrating*”.¹⁷⁶ From 2016 to June 2020, 4’936 adolescents attended the centres.¹⁷⁷

The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare have developed a pilot project entitled “*Migration and development*” which has resulted in ten deported persons becoming certified and included in the labour market, and acquiring a micro-franchise. The Ministry of Economy has opened entrepreneurship centres in the interior of the country and has developed a business training programme for 1’200 entrepreneurs.¹⁷⁸

Civil society reintegration programmes

A few NGOs lead projects to respond to the needs of deported persons. **The majority of these are located and provide their services in the capital city, and focus their efforts mainly on labour reintegration.** Some projects have psychosocial support components and have managed to coordinate between sectors and institutions. However, these efforts are insufficient to meet the existing needs.

The **Guate Te Incluye (Guatemala Includes You)** project is a mechanism promoting inter-institutional and sectoral coordination for the social and labour inclusion of deportees arriving in the country, created and led by the Fundación AVINA, with the support from the public and private sector organisations, civil society, international cooperation and municipalities.¹⁷⁹ In 2019, it certified the skills of 75 deported people, validating their work experience acquired in the United States.¹⁸⁰ The Ministry of Foreign Relations, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of the Interior are allied with this Guate Te Incluye programme.

Te Conecta is a social project that provides advice and training to deported people, which has supported 400 people in different companies,¹⁸¹ principally in call centres.¹⁸² The **Fe y Alegría Guatemala Foundation** has also certified skills so that deportees can reintegrate.¹⁸³ The **Grupo Ceiba Association** has a mobile employment reintegration programme, that also provides a shelter service (for those who do not have a family support network in the country or live in municipalities outside the Capital City). They provide psychosocial, employment support and training in technology. Its target group are young people who had been involved with crime in the United States (carrying drugs for personal use, domestic violence, driving while intoxicated and robberies).¹⁸⁴

In 18 municipalities of the department of Huehuetenango, the **Pop Noj** Association provides culturally relevant psychosocial support and accompanies the return and reintegration of children and adolescents arriving from Mexico and the United States.¹⁸⁵

In addition, organisations have been formed by people who have previously been deported, as well as by migrants in the United States seeking to support their home communities and other deportees in reintegration. The Association of Returnees of Guatemala (ARG) is present in the Guatemalan Air Force building where deportees arrive, and provides peer mentoring. The Asociación Pro Mejoramiento de Deportados Guatemaltecos (APRODE), which was created after the Postville raid (one of the raids of Guatemalan migrants in Iowa, USA, in 2008, where a community of workers was deported en masse), assisted deported people in San José Calderas located in Chimaltenango, through skills training. Now many of their partners work in the tourism sector. Finally, the Cajolá Group, which was born in New Jersey, run community development projects in Cajolá, Quetzaltenango, (these do not receive any government support).¹⁸⁶

Access to durable solutions for asylum seekers, refugees and irregular migrants in Guatemala

Over the last five years, asylum applications by Hondurans and Salvadorans in Guatemala have increased by 500% (from 2015 to 2019). With the signing of the Asylum Cooperation Agreements, these figures are expected to increase.

There are several reasons why Central Americans sometimes consider Guatemala as a destination country; as Guatemala shares a similar cultural identity, language, and transit is permitted due to the CA4 agreement. Furthermore in border areas, social interactions with neighbouring countries is constant.¹⁸⁷ However, the numbers of asylum seekers in the country remain low compared to Mexico and the United States, and Guatemala is yet to be a common destination for people seeking international protection, as violence is also highly prevalent, persecutors are just over the border, and there are limited job opportunities on offer.

“There’s been so much paperwork, so many badly paid jobs, and a general sensation of being lost. This country isn’t ready for refugees. We’re completely abandoned”.

As told by a refugee in Guatemala to the El País newspaper¹⁸⁸

Asylum applications of Hondurans and Salvadorans in Guatemala, 2015 to June 2020

Data from the Ministry of the Interior, public information request: Resolution 1377 MINGOB UIP request 12-61-2020, July 2020.

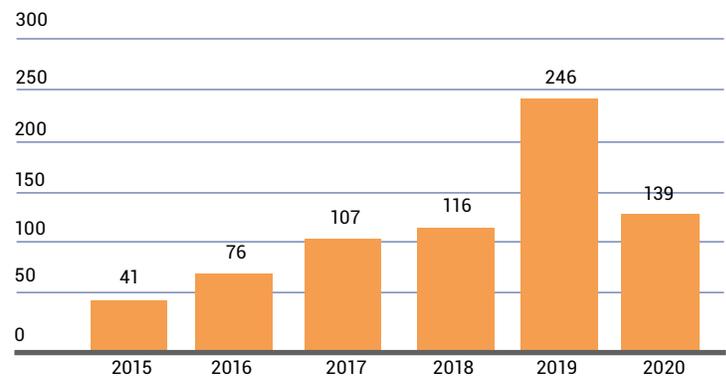




Photo: Ana Karina Delgado, NRC, 2019

Many Hondurans and Salvadorans fleeing violence are unaware that they can request international protection in Guatemala, and often arrive hoping just to escape threats and find work. Upon arrival however, they are most often forced to accept low-paying jobs in poor conditions. As told to Vice by a Salvadoran asylum seeker in Guatemala:¹⁸⁹ *"because I was a foreigner and didn't have Guatemalan documentation, I was paid a tiny salary... I worked many overtime hours but was never compensated"*. He added that this was on top of the emotional burden of family separation: *"I didn't live in luxury at home, but to come with nothing, no family, no money, it's been really tough"*.

Faced with job instability, a lack of social networks and community, and the notable lack of state support, many people see returning home as their only option, despite the risks that this may include. *"I couldn't find a job...I thought of going home, even if it meant facing an early death. But on reflection I couldn't do it. I miss my country, my family, my people and especially the food"* according to the same testimony. In some cases, after several years of remaining in Guatemala irregularly, some people request asylum with the Office of International Migratory Relations (ORMI). Yet despite receiving refugee status, their socioeconomic situation rarely improves, as demonstrated in the following testimony: *"despite the fact that I am supposedly legal in Guatemala, I still feel like I am undocumented, as I suffer rejection and marginalization in job interviews, in banks and by the state services themselves. They always request a Personal Identity Document (DPI), as the only valid document that will be accepted for a procedure"*.

Humanitarian organisations play a vital role in supporting asylum seekers and refugees, and in identifying people with international protection needs. In most cases, people do not see Guatemala

as their first option, however, upon consideration of the dangers of the rest of the migration route and upon learning their right to seek asylum, some choose to request refugee status. However, despite working together to ensure inter-institutional coordination, humanitarian resources are extremely limited. Integration processes require a comprehensive government strategy.

In the implementation of the Comprehensive Regional Framework for Protection and Solutions (MIRPS), the following actions have been carried out:

- *Asylum seekers acquire a provisional permit for 30 days, extendable to permit a long term stay. They also have a right to a personal identity document (Decree 44-2016 article 53) I. The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare facilitates work permits for those who have been in the country for six months (before 2019, work permits were only issued to refugees). As of September 2019, 114 work permits were issued.*¹⁹⁰
- *People with refugee status have access to renewable job permits for one year (by September 2019, 23 permits had been issued).*¹⁹¹

While asylum seekers and refugees are particularly vulnerable when they lack access to family and community support networks, their integration is further complicated by the fact that access to basic services is limited for most Guatemalan citizens in general. The state, beyond recognising refugees and ensuring some legal protections, does not ensure that basic needs are covered (neither for refugees or Guatemalan citizens). Furthermore, there is no reliable record of how many people are still awaiting a resolution to their asylum applications.¹⁹²

Barriers to integration

Access to employment is one of the most difficult challenges faced by asylum seekers and refugees. While having a work permit is important, it often isn't enough to secure employment, because in many cases people cannot meet the requirements necessary for accessing formal jobs (such as police criminal records, certifications, a valid passport)¹⁹³ In many cases, displaced people haven't bought these documents and are obliged to look for informal work, commonly in selling fruit, sweets or cheap goods at traffic lights or on the street. Those that try to open small businesses from home often have to deal with criminal groups, and are exposed to extortion or attacks, on top of stigma and discrimination. Some people (especially women and LGBTI persons) are forced into sex work to be able to survive.¹⁹⁴

Despite the legislative progress made in terms of access to basic services, officials continue to lack understanding on the current laws, and continue to deny services to those who do not have the Personal Identification Document (DPI).¹⁹⁵ Without access to this document, asylum seekers and refugees are unable to access banking services (open accounts and take out loans). While people were previously unable to access social services before Covid-19, they are also unable to access the new services created during the pandemic or intended to reactivate the economy.

Access to decent and safe housing is often also unattainable, as the only spaces accessible for people with low incomes are rooms for entire families, with limited basic services, and often located in places considered in Guatemala City as "red zones".¹⁹⁶

Integration programmes offered by civil society

Organisations such as the **Pastoral de Movilidad Humana, Missionaries of San Carlos Scalabrinianos, Save The Children, Lambda Association, El Refugio de la Niñez**, to name a few, provide psychosocial support, legal advice, and humanitarian assistance to asylum seekers and refugees to assist their integration into the country. **Turi-integra** is an initiative that aims to achieve the labour insertion of asylum seekers and refugees, and is the first project of this nature in the department of El Petén. It is led by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MINTRAB), the Guatemalan Tourism Institute (INGUAT), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the private sector and civil society. It provides a school scholarship for young people, and has ensured the employment of seven people in 2018 and 14 people in 2019. Additionally, 289 people from host communities were trained under the same initiative and 16 courses were given.¹⁹⁷ UNHCR also supports refugees and asylum seekers through Cash-Based Interventions (CBI) to provide protection, assistance and services to the most vulnerable.¹⁹⁸

However, the impact of these initiatives is limited and serve a small proportion of people in need. The humanitarian organisations interviewed for this snapshot also shared that the reception provided by communities receiving migrants and people with protection needs is varied: in some areas, people are met with strong rejection, and in others, especially in border areas, friendly interactions between local and foreign people is very common.

In Mexico

Integration in Mexico

In Mexico, **irregular migrants** are legally guaranteed the right to work, education, health and housing.¹⁹⁹ However, in practice, access to these rights is restricted due to administrative processes that require documentation despite these legal protections. As a result, irregular migrants often only access informal, precarious, dangerous and poorly paid jobs. In terms of access to housing, migrants usually live in peripheral neighbourhoods affected by violence, insecurity and poor access to public services such as public lighting, drinking water and sewage. Regarding access to health, although migrants have the right to free basic or emergency health services, treatment of other non-basic or urgent health issues comes at a cost (which often is impossible for people to pay) and there are long waiting lists. Access to education is also complex due to documentation issues.²⁰⁰ Getting refugee children and adolescents into school, and ensuring their attendance is often limited by several factors: a lack of information or knowledge that they can access the Mexican educational system, inability to pay for the enrolment fee, and remain in the educational system, or language barriers (especially for indigenous children from Central America or extraregional migrants). In the context of Covid-19, while classes have been held online, this access has become even more complicated.

Asylum seekers in the United States returned under the MPP programme face similar challenges in terms of accessing their rights. As there is no regulation in the legal migration framework in Mexico covering people under the MPP programme, those who have to physically remain in Mexico awaiting the resolution of their asylum applications made in the US are only able to access a Forma Migratoria Múltiple (FMM)²⁰¹ which is issued by the INM. This document allows for a temporary stay of up to 180 days, but does not allow for paid employment. As a result, people under the



Photo: Ingebjørg Kårstad/NRC

MPP programme are forced to stay in migrant shelters or makeshift camps near the border crossings (the latter is the preferred option, as they can stay closer to the border and more easily attend their hearings). In addition to being unable to work, they are also unable to send their children to school during the several months that the process may take.²⁰²

Asylum seekers in Mexico also are limited in their access to services and rights.²⁰³ However, whilst waiting for their request to be processed, they can access a Visiting Card for Humanitarian Reasons (TVRH)²⁰⁴ to regularise their immigration status and access assistance. Refugee status secures access to permanent residence. One of the main challenges that asylum seekers face is that they are required to stay in the state where they started their application until its resolution. This implies staying in cities that do not necessarily have enough infrastructure to guarantee their access to comprehensive and quality assistance.²⁰⁵

Refugees have access to the same rights and services as people with Mexican citizenship, except for political rights (such as voting, running for political office and expressing political opinions).²⁰⁶ However access to rights is limited by structural barriers: fragile and precarious health systems, insufficient labour supply or poorly paid jobs; limited access to housing programmes, and a deficient educational system that is not prepared to respond to the particular integration needs of refugee children.²⁰⁷

In this context, 74% of refugees in Mexico depend on temporary jobs without contracts; 92% pay rent (generally through contracts, although the more precarious cases only conclude verbal agreements), 67% of children and adolescents do not attend school, 51% have experienced discrimination and only 52% have been able to access medical care.²⁰⁸ Finally, the economic precariousness that migrants and refugees are faced with leads them to settle in locations characterized by high levels of insecurity and violence, which increase their risk and vulnerability. In many cases they experience situations to those that forced them to leave their countries of origin. For example, 44% of people under the MPP Programme surveyed by Doctors without Borders had suffered violence whilst in Mexico awaiting their hearings in the United States.²⁰⁹

These barriers to accessing rights are further exacerbated for people with a low or basic level of education (primary or secondary, in some cases incomplete), or without technical skills. In these cases, knowledge about rights or the different services on offer in Mexico is often low, and people struggle to access decent livelihoods.

State responses

Irregular migrants are often only able to regularise their status through marriage, a job offer or humanitarian reasons.²¹⁰ In addition, the situation for people under the MPP programme is critical, as while they do not want to live in Mexico and have no interest in requesting asylum in Mexico, they cannot access legal mechanisms to regularise their immigration status while they wait for the resolution of their application filed in the US. On the other hand, the US does not offer them any type of support during the time that they must remain physically in Mexico. However, it is important to mention that, while they are not authorised to work, during Covid-19 some employers have provided employment as a humanitarian gesture, both to irregular migrants and to people under the MPP.

“Trans people, as well as children and adolescents, are the most vulnerable. When trans people start their asylum request, they have to identify themselves according to their name on their official ID, which is often not the one they identify with. Their request is then processed under that name and there are no laws or public policies to subsequently change the regularisation documentation.”

“Child refugees are kept in shelters that are the same or worse than migration detention centres. They cannot go to school. When they turn 18, they are released and receive no support. So they are kept captive, then released, and they don't even know where to go”

Humanitarian organisations in Mexico

Between 18 and 34% of requests for international protection are granted depending on nationality,²¹¹ leaving thousands of people unprotected and at risk of deportation. While this percentage has increased in recent years, the COMAR remains seriously limited in its capacity to process requests due to insufficient funding from the federal government, despite applications having increased by 110%.²¹² Asylum requests should be responded to within 45 business days, but the current average wait is one year, and this has increased during the pandemic, even though requests have stalled during this time.²¹³

Except for a few exceptions²¹⁴ such as the **Law on Interculturality, Attention to Migrants and Human Mobility issued in Mexico City**,²¹⁵ once refugee status is granted, in general, the government assumes that refugees can access services and rights as if they were Mexican citizens. As a result, there are no programmes or public policies aimed at facilitating their integration into the

country.²¹⁶

One exception is the **Sembrando Vida Programme**, through which the federal government announced that it would employ all migrants who were living or wished to live in the country.²¹⁷

However, one year after its implementation, this programme is yet to yield the expected results,²¹⁸ either because migrants have not applied to the programme, as the pay is low, or because they plan on continuing their journey to the US. A second exception is the **Mayan Train project**, through which, according to the federal government, migrants can work in construction.²¹⁹ The project started in May and results are pending. However, it has already been announced that local workers will be given priority for employment.²²⁰ Another important programme is the **Social Emergency Programme of the Ministry of Welfare** through which economic support is provided for carrying out temporary cleaning and social activities, in order to support host communities and facilitate integration.²²¹ Finally, during the Covid-19 emergency, refugees with medical qualifications have been employed to respond to the pandemic.²²²

Responses from host communities and civil society

The response of the host communities is closely linked to the economic and socio-cultural resources of migrants. **Those who have limited economic resources are seen as a threat or competition for sources of employment, which are already scarce in some host areas.** They are also believed to threaten the security and tranquillity of the community. People from the NCA are associated with belonging to gangs or criminal groups. They are also singled out for having left their countries, particularly if they left family members behind. When displaced people and migrants try to defend or claim their rights, they are seen to be rejecting the solidarity and hospitality of host communities.²²³

Children and adolescents are often singled out at school for being foreigners, limiting their social relationships and creating segregated groups. **While xenophobia, segregation, exclusion and discrimination has rarely escalated into public or mediated events, migrants and refugees face them on a daily basis.**²²⁴ Discrimination has been particularly exacerbated during the Covid-19 emergency, since migrants are seen as potential carriers of the virus.²²⁵ For these reasons, streamlining procedures for their integration has become a priority for international organisations and government institutions.²²⁶

Employers have an ambiguous position in relation to the integration of migrants. On the one hand, they often ask the authorities to facilitate regularisation processes so that people can obtain formal jobs, particularly if they have applied for international protection. On the other hand, civil society often calls out the private sector and employers for abusing migrants by offering them low-paid jobs, sometimes without legal benefits, in conditions that border on labour exploitation. Some private companies argue that they offer the same conditions to migrants as to Mexican citizens, but foreigners are not satisfied with the jobs on offer. This scenario is even more complex for those with irregular migration status.

“Some migrants find work unloading trucks. The owners promise that they will pay them 150 pesos for each truck. But in the end, when they have unloaded 4 or 5 trucks, they tell them that they are going to give them 150 for all of the work. If the migrants protest, they threaten to call immigration.”

Humanitarian organisation in Mexico.

On the other hand, positive experiences have been identified in the north of the country, including initiatives led by private companies and civil society, facilitating access to jobs allowing migrants to complete their regularisation procedures, and initiate and reactivate life plans. There are also host communities that, in collaboration with migrant shelters, have facilitated sociocultural, economic and educational integration, for example, through organising sporting events in which migrants and refugees can interact with the local population.²²⁷

“We work with local entrepreneurs who provide job opportunities for migrants, especially for those with previous experience in construction or agriculture. For those who do not have documents, more informal support is given so that they are not left destitute”

Humanitarian organisation in Mexico.

However, in general, across the country few civil society organisations work on the integration of migrants. Those that do are limited by several factors:

- integration depends on the laws and public policies, challenging efforts to help people with irregular migration status;
- integration requires medium and long-term interventions,
- civil society does not have the sufficient human or financial resources to sustain these types of interventions.

Despite the above, organisations such as **RET**²²⁸, **PCR**²²⁹, **CAFEMIN**²³⁰, **SJM**²³¹, **CMDPDH**²³² and **INTRARE**²³³; support an important part of the short-term needs that facilitate integration. Actions include legal support during regularisation procedures, job training, temporary accommodation, referrals to job offers, education, work to promote awareness among employers and authorities and, in some cases, mediation between migrants and employers²³⁴. UNHCR, together with other organisations and authorities, have implemented an integration programme that provides economic, labour and housing support to refugee families seeking to settle in Mexico²³⁵, as well as to seek alliances with the private sector for the financial inclusion of refugees.²³⁶

Given the current situation in which more and more migrants and asylum seekers are deciding to stay in Mexico, organisations are incorporating integration actions into their programmes. An initiative to convert shelters into community centres can be highlighted as a good practice to promote alternatives for local integration with communities living close to migration shelters. Other initiatives include adapting or constructing spaces that serve a double function (both as shelter and classrooms that offer training workshops to the whole community), and the promotion of alliances with employers and educational institutions to offer technical-labour training. Unfortunately, due to Covid-19, these initiatives have been put on hold as they are not considered as a priority, unlike immediate humanitarian relief.²³⁷

4 How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the reintegration of people deported to the NCA?

The Covid-19 pandemic not only fundamentally affects the integration strategies of people at the individual, community and state level, but also determines the conditions in which deportees return. The tendency for communities of origin to discriminate and stigmatise this population has increased due to the suspicion that they have contracted the virus, regardless or not whether they have been tested.

El Salvador

Estimates suggest that between March and June, more than 1'300 people were deported to El Salvador, mostly from the US.²³⁸ The Covid-19 emergency has had multiple effects on deportees, the deportation process and the welcome received from host communities. Deportees were required to complete a mandatory quarantine (on average for 30 days) in one of the 11 Quarantine Centres specifically set up for this purpose.²³⁹ In these spaces, public and private organizations provide medical care, hygiene kits and food aid. Through the interagency response of the Humanitarian Country Team, IOM in coordination with the General Directorate of Migration and Foreigners (DGME), provide a supermarket voucher of \$50 as financial support to deportees (who, having completed the quarantine and obtained a negative result in the Covid-19 test, leave the centres to be transported to their communities of origin).²⁴⁰ However, while various services are on offer in these centres in an attempt to reduce the vulnerability of deportees, according to a report by the Comprehensive Clinic for Returned Persons (CLIAR), 49% of the 220 migrants deported between May and June reported not having received any type of support in the Quarantine Centres.²⁴¹

Humanitarian organisations in El Salvador report that one of the main challenges has been the educational reintegration of deported children. In the 5'164 Educational Centres identified by the Observatory of the Ministry of Education in 2018, it is estimated that only 30% have technology services.²⁴² While the general population also does not have equitable access to online education,²⁴³ as of December 2017, 58% of the population had access to the internet through different devices and platforms,²⁴⁴ however, according to the testimony of a humanitarian organisation, this situation is not uniform throughout the territory. Municipalities such as San Salvador, San Miguel and Usulután are better prepared to facilitate the continuity of education. Finally, it is important to highlight that, according to an IOM Livelihoods Survey of returned migrants in El Salvador during Covid-19, one third of those surveyed said that they intended to try the migration route again, rather than on staying in the country.²⁴⁵

“There is a certain stigmatisation towards deported persons: the quarantine centers for deportees are of poorer quality compared to ones for other people entering the country. They usually go to hostels, instead of hotels... and there is evidence of discriminatory treatment. The centres are managed with such secrecy that it is difficult for organisations to access people in need, or to conduct reception interviews to identify specific needs. We have had to provide our services by telephone, and put up posters in the centres so that people can contact us. This has made it impossible to follow-up many cases, or to have direct contact with people. Face-to-face contact with deported persons is very important to generate a relationship of trust. COVID-19 has meant that returning to the community of origin is more secretive and clandestine.”

Humanitarian Organisation in El Salvador

Honduras

At first, the Government of Honduras lacked a plan to deal with deportees during the context of Covid-19. While the CAMRs remained open, they lacked the material and technical capacities to be able to receive the amount of deportees arriving, and so temporary shelters were set up. However, some humanitarian organisations expressed their concerns regarding the lack of accessible and transparent information mechanisms on the management of these shelters.²⁴⁶

“The Migrant Assistance Center in Omoa has closed, because the local community refused to allow deportees to arrive. On the other hand, the Mayor of Lima (where the airport is located) encouraged the local population to defend their municipality by force if necessary to avoid the reception of deported persons. As a result of these events, deportees were transferred to San Pedro Sula.”

Humanitarian Organisation in Honduras

The Government and the Secretariat for Human Rights has implemented a campaign aimed at preventing discrimination against people infected by the virus.²⁴⁷ Meanwhile, within the United Nations and in particular the Protection Cluster, a campaign has been launched to prevent discrimination against irregular migrants and deportees.

Some organisations suggest that in the long term, communities need to be prepared for a possible mass arrival of deportees, and suggest that safe cities or municipalities must be prepared for referrals. However, this strategy may be problematic in terms of coexistence, since no work to prepare communities has been done and there is no evidence that the reaction of these municipalities will be positive.

“I do feel sorry for them, especially as they can’t go home. [...] Within half an hour of arriving they will be dead. Sometimes we try to support them, so they can save their life. [...] Unfortunately, the government doesn’t provide any shelters or support. Sometimes we hear on the news that people that have just arrived from the United States and passed through the centre have been murdered.”

Testimony of an official from the Returned Migrant Attention Center-Lima (CAMR)²⁴⁸

Guatemala

From the start of the pandemic in Guatemala, up until June, 8’705 people were deported from the United States and Mexico. Government efforts have focused on providing some basic services during reception, but health services for deportees who have tested positive for Covid-19 are scarce and quarantine centres do not have adequate conditions.²⁴⁹

Unfortunately, government messages and the already existing stigma towards deportees have strengthened the idea in public discourse that deportees are carriers of Covid-19. Due to this, reports have shown deportees being violently denied access to their communities, and public rejections of quarantine shelters being rejected.²⁵⁰ In this context, it is worth noting that some municipalities have worked to provide information and campaigns to avoid rejection and discrimination against deportees, and have coordinated mechanisms to provide community support.²⁵¹

There have been some changes to the administrative processes for family reunification of unaccompanied children and adolescents deported to Guatemala. Although measures have been taken to maintain social distancing by providing hotels during the quarantine period and free transportation to transfer children to the capitals of their home departments for family reunification, civil society organisations note that there remain challenges to

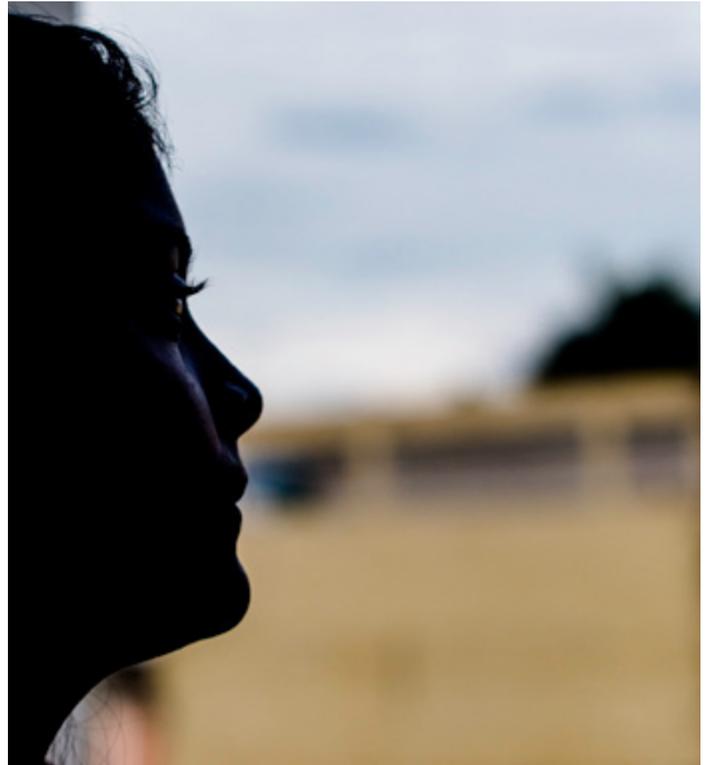


Photo: Ingebjørg Kårstad/NRC

ensure that these processes work properly. On the one hand, community rejection and stigma has forced some parents to leave their children with relatives, since they have not been allowed back into their communities. Those that do not have alternative care options have simply not appeared for family reunification.²⁵² On the other hand, in some cases, the relatives or caregivers of the children and adolescents cannot afford to travel to the capital of their department to pick up their children (especially due to the pandemic, as lockdowns have prevented people from working for a daily income). Finally, others have been refused transportation (whether public or private), as deportees are feared to be carrying the virus.²⁵³

While children already in the educational system prior to the pandemic face barriers to accessing virtual schooling or staying in the educational system,²⁵⁴ it is practically impossible for deported children and adolescents to restart school during the pandemic, and there is no governmental support to do so. In addition, deported minors cannot access the social programmes of School Recreation that the Ministry of Education is developing.

5 What about the third durable solution, resettlement?

Resettlement is the durable solution least accessed by displaced people in the North of Central America. In 2016, the US launched the Protection Transfer Agreement (PTA), a mechanism seeking to provide access to durable solutions in third countries, via a transit country, to people from the North of Central America in urgent need of protection²⁵⁵. By the end of 2019, this mechanism had identified 3'757 people in need, of which 1'746 (46%) were referred to third countries (including Australia, Canada, Brazil and Uruguay)²⁵⁶, for resettlement. However only 689 (18%) had been resettled by the end of 2019.²⁵⁷

The PTA has been used in particular for survivors of gender-based violence, human rights defenders, and victims at risk of persecution after filing a police report. It is a useful mechanism that saves lives, but it is a long process and targets only those who are unable to flee on their own.²⁵⁸

Although this mechanism is a joint, considerable and important effort by governments to protect people with protection needs, and is vital for those who have benefitted from it, its impact remains limited, especially considering that 469'312 refugees and asylum seekers from the North of Central America were identified by UNHCR in 2019.²⁵⁹

6 Final considerations

Asylum seekers and refugees face administrative, cultural and socioeconomic barriers that hinder integration.²⁶⁰

The lack of an immigration regularisation document deprives them of the ability to access a formal job, acquire a home and go to school. In Mexico, the obligation to stay in the same federal state where they started their application, until it is processed, along with the shortcomings in health, employment and educational systems means that, asylum seekers lack real options for integrating and accessing a durable solution. This situation is especially worrisome for children and adolescents, who are unable to access education. The work of civil society organisations is essential for identifying asylum seekers and people with international protection needs, advising them on their rights and enabling them to apply for refugee status. In addition, in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, the livelihoods of asylum seekers, refugees and those with international protection needs have worsened.

Both States and civil society organisations provide important services to support the reintegration of deported persons, but as a general rule these programmes do not ensure comprehensive approaches, sustainable reintegration, or durable solutions.

The different services analysed in this report are not properly interconnected and systematised. They must be specialised, incorporate a gender perspective, a de-centralised territorial strategy and a human rights approach.²⁶¹ The lack of coherence and adaptation of the programmes to the needs and context, together with the prevalence of structural factors such as criminal violence, insecurity and the lack of opportunities, often lead deportees to attempt the migration route again. Effective reintegration requires adapting the legal frameworks of the NCA countries to promote the labour insertion of deportees, implementing educational programmes with scholarship services, and vocational training to guarantee continuity in school. These programmes also need to incorporate a psychosocial perspective that takes into account the experiences that deportees have gone through and will experience upon their return. Finally, access to housing has not received the same attention and resources; promoting access to housing is essential for guaranteeing other rights, such as to education.²⁶²

The socioeconomic status of deportees exacerbates ongoing protection risks.²⁶³

Time abroad makes deportees a target of threats, extortion and other violent acts by gangs and criminal groups, as they are considered a source of economic income. On the other hand, any debt accumulated to finance their journeys must be repaid upon return. These circumstances generate a situation of double vulnerability that increases the probability that people will have to flee again if they are exposed to further risks.

The impact of Covid-19 has intensified existing discrimination and stigma towards deportees.

According to certain humanitarian organisations, the quarantine centres for deportees are of poorer quality compared to the centres for other profiles. This dynamic constitutes a first barrier to accessing reintegration.²⁶⁴ In addition, the educational reintegration of children and adolescents is affected by unequal access to technology and the internet. It is essential to promote campaigns aimed at preventing discrimination against irregular migrants and deportees, in order to guarantee peaceful coexistence in host communities. In a context of economic and social uncertainty, border closures, mobility restrictions and integration difficulties can lead deportees to take on greater risks and financial costs to flee, making them more vulnerable to human smuggling and trafficking.²⁶⁵

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