MIGRATION TRENDS IN CENTRAL AMERICA, NORTH AMERICA, AND THE CARIBBEAN DURING COVID-19

November 2020
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OBJECTIVES OF THE BRIEF

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a significant impact on the health, social and economic situation in countries of Central America, North America and the Caribbean, and directly or indirectly affects millions of people. Migrants have been particularly impacted by this crisis.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM)’s Regional Office for Central America, North America and the Caribbean presents this brief in order to highlight several key changes and trends in mobility and migration that have occurred during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The brief focuses on official statistics from January to August 2020, using data from 2019 as a reference. Most of the information is derived from official records published and maintained by governments in the region.
IOM’S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

IOM is working with governments and partners to ensure that migrants – in regular or irregular situations, returnees, and displaced persons – are included in efforts to mitigate and combat the pandemic’s impact.

IOM’s efforts to support vulnerable groups affected by COVID-19, including migrants, are geared towards avoiding harmful complications, minimizing hardship and reducing public health risk. All migrants, in regular or irregular situations, and including those in exploitative situations, should have access to health information, testing, treatment and care. They should also be included in contact tracing and community interventions.

IOM’s Regional Preparedness and Response Plan, for the period from February to December 2020, focuses on four strategic priorities:

1. Ensure a well-coordinated, informed and timely response through mobility tracking systems and strengthening partnership and coordination structures at the community, national and regional level.

2. Contribute to global, regional, national and community preparedness and response efforts for COVID-19 to reduce associated morbidity and mortality.

3. Ensure access of affected people to basic services and commodities, including health care and protection and social services.

4. Support international, national and local partners to respond to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19.

See the following resources for more information:

- Our online global portal with more information about the impact of COVID-19 on mobility restrictions (Mobility Impacts COVID-19), available here.
- Our regional portal with COVID-19 related communication materials, available here.
- COVID-19 situation reports from around the world, available here.
**RECENT CHANGES IN MOBILITY**

**Figure 1:** Total monthly entries to the national territory of selected countries, foreigners and / or nationals, 2019 and 2020

**United States** (foreigners, millions, Jan-Aug)

**Mexico** (foreigners and nationals, millions, Jan-Aug)

**Canada** (foreigners and nationals, millions, Jan-Aug)

**Costa Rica** (foreigners and nationals, thousands, Jan-Jun)
In the first eight months of 2020, there was a significant decrease in human mobility throughout the region, beginning in March. This decline in mobility coincided with the introduction of travel restrictions imposed by various countries in the region in order to contain the outbreak of COVID-19. A slight increase may be observed in the number of entries/arrivals registered between June and August 2020 (where updated public data are available) in countries where restrictions have been lifted or lessened.

The number of apprehensions of migrants originating from Northern Central America reported by Mexican immigration authorities increased by more than 112 per cent in January 2020 compared with December 2019. After a notable decrease between March and May 2020, the number of registered apprehensions began to increase again between May and August 2020.

Source: Migration Policy Unit, Registry and Identity of People (Mexican Secretariat of the Interior), Eventos de extranjeros presentados ante la autoridad migratoria, según continente y país de nacionalidad, 2019 and 2020, n.d. [07 Oct. 2020]. *Note: apprehensions data are based on information recorded in migrant centers, central and local offices of the National Institute of Migration, and correspond to events rather than individuals (i.e. the same individual could have been apprehended more than once) (data for 2020 are provisional and are subject to change).

After a 47 per cent decrease in migrant apprehensions recorded on the southwestern United States border between March and April 2020, the number of monthly apprehensions began to increase again, and in August 2020 reflected levels similar to the same month in 2019. In any year, most migrants apprehended at the United States-Mexico border originate from Mexico and countries of Northern Central America (Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador).

Source: United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP) (Department of Homeland Security), Southwest Border Migration FY 2020, n.d. [07 Oct. 2020]. *Note: Beginning in March 2020, statistics on apprehensions include both Title 8 Apprehensions (detentions or inadmissibles processed under the authority of CBP) and Title 42 Expulsions (individuals expelled to the country of last transit or home country in the interest of public health) (data for 2020 are provisional and are subject to change).
Between January 2019 and August 2020, the main countries of origin of migrants identified in irregular transit in the southern zone of Panama were: Haiti (13,860), Cuba (3,397), Cameroon (2,251), India (2,116), Congo (1,345), Bangladesh (1,108) and Chile (939), followed by several other Asian, African and South American countries. Nationals of the seven aforementioned countries constituted 87.4 per cent of all migrants identified in irregular transit in this area during this 20-month period.

Source: Migration Policy Unit, Registry and Identity of People (Mexican Secretariat of the Interior), Eventos de extranjeros presentados ante la autoridad migratoria, según continente y país de nacionalidad, 2019 and 2020, n.d. [07 Oct. 2020].  
3 Note: apprehensions data are based on information recorded in migrant centers, central and local offices of the National Institute of Migration, and correspond to events rather than individuals (i.e. the same individual could have been apprehended more than once) (data for 2020 are provisional and are subject to change).
Migrant Returns

The number of migrant returns to countries of Northern Central America recorded in January 2020 represented the highest figure registered for the month of January in the past four years. However, between March and June there was a significant decrease in the number of recorded returns, with a slight rebound in July and August. During the first eight months of 2020, 115,480 fewer migrant returns were registered in Northern Central America compared with the same period in 2019, representing a 64.3 per cent decline. Of the 65,339 migrants who returned to Northern Central America between January and August 2020, 8,071 (12.4%) returned to El Salvador, 29,261 (44.8%) to Guatemala and 28,046 (42.9%) to Honduras.

Source: Northern Triangle Migration Information Management Initiative (NTMI) (IOM), Returning Migrants to the NTCA / January - August 2020, n.d. [10 Oct. 2020]. *Note: Figures on migrant returns are based on administrative data maintained by countries in Northern Central America and include repatriated migrants and assisted returns (data are subject to changes based on monthly updates to the source).
In the four fiscal years from 2016 to 2019, the number of H-2A temporary agricultural visas issued in the United States increased by almost 53 per cent. In the first eight months of 2020, there was a 2.5 per cent increase in the number of H-2A visas issued compared to the same period during the previous year (167,307 from Jan-Aug 2020, vs. 163,264 during this period in 2019). Between January 2019 and August 2020, nationals of Mexico (344,589, or 92% of H-2A visas issued in this period), Jamaica (9,136), Guatemala (4,560), Nicaragua (1,228) and Honduras (501) were the principal recipients of H-2A visas in the region.

In the first eight months of 2020, the number of H-2B visas issued fell by 50.1 per cent compared to the same period in 2019. Between January 2019 and August 2020, nationals of Mexico (104,998, or 75% of H-2B visas issued in this period), Jamaica (14,184), Guatemala (3,665), Honduras (1,499) and El Salvador (733) were the principal recipients of H-2B visas in the region. The main sectors of employment for H-2B workers are: groundskeeping and landscaping (approximately 40% of the total), forestry (approximately 8%), followed by jobs in amusement / recreation, hospitality, meat / fish processing, construction and restaurant work.

In the first eight months of 2020, the number of F1 visas issued in the United States fell by 82.9 per cent compared to the same period in 2019. In total, 1.94 million non-immigrant visas (which include 19 classes of visas, including H-2A, H-2B and F1) were issued in the United States in the first eight months of 2020. This represents a significant decrease compared to previous years. For example, in the first eight months of 2019, 6.1 million non-immigrant visas were issued, representing more than triple the amount issued in this period in 2020.

The number of new temporary residency applications and extensions (which include temporary resident visas, visitor registrations, study permits, work permits, extensions and more) approved by Canada decreased by 52 per cent in the first semester (Jan-Jun) of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019, by 53 per cent compared to the same period in 2018, and by 43 per cent compared to the first semester of 2017. Between January and June 2020, nationals of Mexico (30,474), Jamaica (14,502), Guatemala (9,252), the United States (7,492) and Haiti (4,262) were the main recipients of temporary Canadian residence visas in the region.


**Figure 12:** Missing migrants identified in North America, Central America and the Caribbean, 2014-2020 (Jan-Sept)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>United States – Mexico Border</th>
<th>Caribbean</th>
<th>Central America</th>
<th>North America</th>
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<td>681</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>369</td>
<td>46</td>
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<tr>
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<td>89</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>37</td>
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<tr>
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<td>428</td>
<td>37</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>697</td>
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<tr>
<td>2020 (Jan-Sept)</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>6</td>
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<table>
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<th>Women</th>
<th>Children</th>
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**Table 1:** Missing migrants identified in North America, Central America and the Caribbean, by subregion, 2020 (Jan-Sept)

- **IOM’s Missing Migrants Project** collects data from various sources (including from coast guards and medical examiners, and other sources such as media reports, NGOs, and surveys and interviews of migrants, amongst others), to track migrants who have died or gone missing during their migration journeys to a different country. From 2014 to 21 September 2020, more than 4,000 died during their migration journeys in the region. About 65 per cent of these identified deaths were documented on the U.S.-Mexico border.

- Despite mobility restrictions and border closures established in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, migrants continue to embark on dangerous and potentially life-threatening migration journeys. Hundreds of migrant deaths were recorded in region in the first eight months of 2020.

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**Note:** data in Figure 12 and Table 1 are up-to-date as of 21 September 2020. It should be noted that, in the Central America, North America and Caribbean region, there are zones where it is difficult to achieve an accurate count of missing and deceased migrants, and incidents may be undercounted. Little is known about the deaths of migrants on remote or less populated routes, such as the Darien Gap region on the land border between Colombia and Panama, or on maritime routes, including the “Mona Passage” between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico.

Remittances are a fundamental support and insurance mechanism for migrant families in countries of origin. The COVID-19 pandemic has generated concerns both regionally and globally regarding the capacities of migrants to send remittances home, given the strong socioeconomic impacts of this crisis in migrant destination countries. These concerns are elevated in recipient countries with a strong and sometimes growing dependency on remittances. Remittances reached the equivalent of 10 per cent or more, and in a few countries more than 20 per cent of GDP in 2019 (see Figure 13). Although remittances constitute a smaller proportion compared to the total GDP in some other countries of origin in the region – for example, the Dominican Republic, or Mexico, which has the third highest rate of migrant remittances inflows in the world and received more than USD 39 billion in remittances in 2019 – inflows remain high in absolute terms (see Figure 14).

Figure 13: Top remittance-receiving countries in Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean, in % of GDP, where remittances exceed 10% of GDP (2016-2019)

Figure 14: Top remittance-receiving countries in Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean, in USD billions, where remittances exceed USD 3 billion (2016-2019)


Overall, remittances received in certain top remittance-receiving countries in the region (where monthly data are available) did not exhibit a drastic decline in the first seven or eight months of 2020. In contrast, remittances received in Mexico in the first eight months of 2020 registered an increase of 9.6 per cent compared to the same period in 2019. In Guatemala, the Dominican Republic and El Salvador, after a considerable decrease in March and April, remittance flows rebounded in May. In total, remittances received in Guatemala during the first eight months of 2020 exceeded by 2.2 per cent the amount of remittances received during the same period in 2019, while in Jamaica they increased by 13.6 per cent in the first seven months and by 7.3 per cent in the Dominican Republic compared to the first eight months of 2019. In El Salvador, remittances received fell by 1.5 per cent in the first eight months of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019.