

POLICY BRIEF

Investing in the Neighborhood: Changing Mexico-U.S. Migration Patterns and Opportunities for Sustainable Cooperation

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STATEMENT OF ISSUE

As the migration landscape across the region has changed, and Mexico has increasingly become a destination as well as a transit country, policy has not always kept pace. Many of the migration challenges that Mexico and the United States face are similar. Both have large numbers of each other's citizens living in their country and attending their schools, as well as immigrants from elsewhere, and they need to think proactively about how to best support the integration of immigrants into local communities. Their governments have significant opportunities to engage with civil society and the private sector to ensure that integration works in favor of economic growth and social outcomes for the societies at large.

KEY FINDINGS

- The profile of migrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border has changed significantly. Central American migration is more mixed than previous Mexican migration flows, with families and unaccompanied children comprising larger shares than single adult men. In 2013, 4% of apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexico border were of family units, compared to 56% in the first eleven months of 2019. Except for in 2015, the family share of apprehensions has increased. Apprehensions of unaccompanied children have remained between 11% and 14% through 2018.
- The immigrant population in Mexico doubled from 2000 to 2013, rising from 521,000 to 1.1 million. By 2015, approximately 740,000 U.S.-born migrants lived in Mexico, representing 73% of the country's 1 million immigrants.
- Both Mexico and the United States have seen significant increases in asylum requests by Central Americans. The asylum systems of both countries have been unable to keep up with the increase in requests. As of June 2019, approximately 350,000 asylum cases waited unresolved in U.S. immigration courts. In Mexico, 80% of all asylum cases submitted to the Mexican Refugee Commission (COMAR) in 2018 remained unresolved at the year's end.
- From 2014 to 2018, migrants from countries other than Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras represented 3-5% of U.S. apprehensions, climbing to approximately 9% in the first eleven months of FY 2019. Most recently, the top nationalities have been India, Brazil, Ecuador, China, and Nicaragua.
- While Mexico has a large U.S.-born population, many of them have Mexican heritage. Meanwhile, Mexico remains more a country of transit than a receiving country for unauthorized migrants and asylum seekers, although this may change gradually. Mexico also has a much larger diaspora in the United States than vice versa, and many of Mexicans living north of the border are without legal status, putting them in a far more precarious situation than most Americans in Mexico.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Use a regional approach to engage Mexico in ways that are mutually beneficial and binationally cooperative, rather than imposing unilateral measures that undermine cooperation.
- Replace irregular flows with regular migration by expanding legal pathways, reforming asylum systems, enhancing border control, and addressing root causes of migration.
- Reform asylum systems in both Mexico and the United States, focusing on changes that relieve application backlogs. To achieve this, Mexico would benefit from tripling the budget for COMAR, the Mexican asylum agency, and the United States would benefit from an overall increase in the efficiency of the asylum system.
- Strengthen the institutions that can implement immigration policy by increasing funds for Mexico's National Migration Institute and rethinking physical infrastructure in the U.S. would help modernize immigration agencies in both countries.
- Create different approaches to employment-based immigration in order to increase alternatives to irregular migration.
- Identify, disrupt, and degrade large migrant smuggling organizations in the United States and Mexico, prioritizing organizations that are known to engage in human trafficking or prey on migrants.

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