

## A Sharp Drop in Migrant Arrivals on the Border: What's Happening?

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Instituto Madre Asunta, a family shelter in Tijuana, for weeks has been packing in more than three times as many people than it is suited to accommodate. But over the border in San Diego, one shelter is almost empty. Emily Kask for The New York Times

SAN DIEGO — At its peak, the nonprofit shelter run by Jewish Family Service of San Diego held more than 300 migrants dropped off by United States immigration authorities after they crossed the border from Mexico. Some days this spring were so busy that new arrivals had to be sent to overflow sites.

Now, the shelter is almost eerily empty. The number of people arriving there has plunged in recent weeks amid a precipitous decline in arrivals along the southern border, where the Department of Homeland Security said that apprehensions [dropped 28 percent](#) in June.

While migrant arrivals typically decline as the hot, hazardous summer months set in, the Department of Homeland Security said the drop in June was much larger than the 11 percent drop in June of last year.

The difference suggested that the Trump administration's long push to curtail the arrival of migrants at the southern border is finally showing results.

Since he took office, President Trump has made it a cornerstone of his administration to halt the flow of undocumented migrants, expanding security fencing, slowing processing at ports of entry and locking up record numbers of migrants.

The administration's latest policies have gone a step further. The threat of tariffs helped push Mexico to deploy security forces on its own southern border, curtailing the flow of migrants from neighboring Guatemala.

A second initiative has forced many migrants to return to Mexico to await the outcome of their asylum or deportation cases in American immigration courts. More than 18,000 migrants, including asylum seekers, have been returned to Tijuana and other Mexican cities since the policy was put into place, according to Mexico's National Migration Institute.

Some families have been at Madre Asunta for months.Emily Kask for The New York Times



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"These initiatives are making an impact," the Department of Homeland Security said in a statement.

At the nonprofit shelter here in San Diego, the effects have been drastic. On Friday of last week, not a single migrant arrived — a first for the facility since it opened in October.

“We have been startled by the stark decline that happened virtually overnight,” said Kate Clark, senior director of immigration services at the shelter. “U.S. immigration authorities are not bringing families who have been processed to the shelter because they are returning them to Mexico.”

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Tijuana, by contrast, is still full of migrants — many of them turned back at the border under the Trump administration’s “Remain in Mexico” program.

“The United States policy to return people to Mexico and the pressure on Mexico to stop the migration are having a big impact,” said Daniel Bribiescas, an immigration lawyer in Tijuana.

The Instituto Madre Asunta, a shelter for migrant families just south of the border, has for several weeks packed in more than three times the number of people it is designed to accommodate. Mothers and children from Central America and Haiti have been sleeping in a classroom converted into a dormitory, many atop mattresses on the floor.

“We’re doing our best to sleep 140 people but we only have 44 beds,” said Adelia Contini, the nun who runs the facility, which is in a residential neighborhood with a shelter for fathers and children that was also over capacity.

Some families have been at the Madre Asunta shelter for months, after American immigration authorities sent them to Mexico with instructions to show up at the San Ysidro, Calif., port of entry at dawn on the day of their immigration hearing to be transported to court.

Mexico’s own heightened border security is also having an effect. To make good on a deal struck with Mr. Trump last month to avert trade tariffs, more than 20,000 Mexican security forces, including members of the newly formed National Guard, have been [deployed throughout the country’s southern and northern border states](#).

A bus stop near the border in Tijuana. A commercial bus company has begun offering direct service from Tijuana to Tapachula, a Mexican city close to the Guatemalan border. Emily Kask for The New York Times

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The Mexican authorities have been trying to plug well-known but illegal crossing points along their southern border, and have set up checkpoints along major highways to intercept vehicles carrying undocumented migrants. In Tijuana, officers have been stopping and arresting migrants who do not have papers.

The Department of Homeland Security said there had been a “substantial increase” in the number of interdictions on Mexico’s southern border.

In a conference call with reporters on Wednesday, a Customs and Border Protection official said Mexico’s deployment of forces on its northern frontier had helped stop “large groups” of migrants before they could cross into the United States. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said agents had apprehended 15 groups of 100 or more migrants in June, down from 48 such groups in May.

“I would attribute to Mexico for making some difference,” the official said.

The decline in arrivals in June has helped reduce overcrowding at border facilities. About 200 children are currently being held in Border Patrol centers, compared with roughly 2,700 in May, the official said. He said a \$4.6 billion border aid package approved last month by Congress, which gave about \$3 billion to the Department of Health and Human Services, had allowed that agency to more quickly move children out of Border Patrol facilities and into its own, better-equipped shelters.

With more Central Americans stuck in Mexico and hoping to go home, the International Organization for Migration began last week to provide free bus service from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, to Guatemala and Honduras. Buses left last week carrying 67 migrants back home. A second group of 70 boarded buses on Tuesday. The agency plans to begin offering a similar bus service from Tijuana in the coming days.

None of those on the I.O.M. buses said they had been seeking asylum in the United States, according to Christopher Gascon, the agency’s chief of mission in Mexico.

Dozens of migrants who said they were considering returning home jammed a small travel agency in Tijuana on Monday.

Jenaro Mejia, 54, an asylum seeker from Honduras, said his first court hearing in the United States was set for Aug. 5. “We don’t know if we will win asylum or not,” he said. Faced with the prospect of languishing for several more months in Mexico, Mr. Mejia said he planned to go home and would not return. “We have contacted family to buy us tickets,” said Mr. Mejia, as his son Fabio, 15, bleary-eyed from exhaustion, stood by his side.

People crossed the bridge from Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, to Laredo, Tex., on Wednesday. Luis Antonio Rojas for The New York Times

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But most migrants said they could not afford the 3,000 pesos, or about \$155, for a private, one-way bus ticket back to Central America; their money had already gone to smugglers who guided them to the United States. “Some of us sold our land to realize the dream of coming here. We don’t have the money for a ticket home,” said Carlos Mauricio López, a Guatemalan migrant whose first court hearing was set for Oct. 4.

Critics have said that the Remain in Mexico policy endangers migrants who fled violence in their home countries, because Mexican border cities are also often unsafe. In addition, the program makes it difficult for migrants to secure an American lawyer to represent them before an immigration judge, undermining their ability to petition for asylum.

At the shelter in San Diego, only nationals from countries like India, China and Russia, whose citizens are not subjected to the Remain in Mexico policy, continue to trickle in, Ms. Clark said. The only exceptions to the policy among Latin Americans are those who have a child or another family member with a serious medical issue. A Honduran man who identified himself only as Jonnie arrived with his 4-year-old girl, who had advanced scoliosis. He said she was in critical need of surgery.

Elsewhere along the Mexican side of the border, there were also signs that fewer migrants were arriving from the south.

In Nuevo Laredo, on the Mexican side of the border opposite Laredo, Tex., the number of residents in the half-dozen migrant shelters in the city has dropped sharply in recent weeks, after months of operating well above capacity. At the Casa del Migrante Nazareth, the number of migrants, nearly all of them intending to seek asylum in the United States, has hovered around 100 in recent days, well below the peak of 290 at the beginning of May.

The Casa del Migrante Amar, another shelter in the city, was housing about 100 migrants on Wednesday, about a fifth of the number that crammed the center for weeks earlier this year.

Shelter operators said there could be several reasons for the drop, including stricter occupancy limits imposed by the shelters, and the city’s reputation for being a dangerous place, which has perhaps compelled migrants to head to other border cities. But some advocates here also said it was possible that the joint Mexico-United States crackdown on undocumented migration could be slowing the flow.

“It could be dissuading migrants,” Father Julio López, who runs the Casa del Migrante Nazareth, said of the new bilateral strategies. They might be biding their time in their home countries or elsewhere on the migrant trail, he said, “waiting to see what will happen.”

