

**HOPE**

**JRS** MÉXICO  
SERVICIO JESUITA A REFUGIADOS

## **“I am physically and mentally exhausted”:**

Migration policies and health at the  
US-Mexico border



## Executive Summary

This report examines the impact of the United States and Mexico migration policies on the mental and physical health of people on the move. Through a survey conducted with 83 family units, representing 177 individuals in Ciudad Juárez, between January and June of 2024, the study shows that:

- 4 out of 5 individuals have suffered violence during their migratory journey through Mexico.
- More than 60% of individuals describe the transit through Mexico as “difficult or very difficult”
- More than 50% of individuals have been victims of robberies, while 35% have been victims of extortion.
- 20.4% of respondents were survivors of kidnapping. Mexican authorities were involved in more than 30% of documented kidnappings.
- 40% of respondents blame the Mexican authorities for their mental and physical discomfort, while 26% blame organized crime.
- 43% of respondents blame the migration policies of the United States and Mexico for their tiredness and exhaustion.
- More than 60% of respondents reported weight loss and nearly 50% reported muscle pains. 1 in 3 individuals suffered from diarrhea.
- More than 60% of respondents reported suffering from depression.
- More than half of respondents reported feeling afraid, fatigued, worried, frustrated and nervous.
- 1 in 3 respondents reported experiencing intrusive thoughts.
- 3 in 4 respondents affirmed that the psycho-emotional condition they reported did not exist before the migratory journey.
- For more than 70% of respondents, prayer and their faith helped them alleviate some of these impacts, followed by the experience of being in community with others.

It is urgent that migration policies of the United States and Mexico center the health of individuals on the move among their priorities, focusing on facilitating access to asylum and transit instead of repressing and containing those seeking safety.

## I. Introduction

In the past few years, violence against people moving toward the US-Mexico border has worsened to the point of becoming the “world’s deadliest migration land route.”<sup>1</sup> Immigration contention policies applied in Mexico as a result of pressure from the United States, border militarization and the expansion of immigration controls and immigration detention in Mexico are some of the causes of the resurgence of this violence against people on the move.<sup>2</sup> As a result, more and more people are forced to seek more dangerous routes to migrate, while their vulnerability to unscrupulous state and criminal actors continues to increase.<sup>3</sup>

The violence suffered by people on the move in Mexico has severe impacts on their physical, mental and emotional health. This report aims to document the psychosocial impacts of a migratory journey increasingly hardened by the United States and Mexico’s migration policies.

To this end, this report is based on structured interviews with 83 family units, reflecting the experiences of 177 individuals in forced mobility from Venezuela, Mexico, Colombia, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru and Haiti. The interviews were conducted by the psychosocial team at Jesuit Refugee Service Mexico (JRS MX) in shelters in Ciudad Juárez between January and July of 2024. Data collected included sociodemographic information, migratory profile, self-assessment of the psychosocial impacts and a mapping of crime incidence. Likewise, the report uses systemic monitoring data collected between June 2021 and September 2024 by JRS Mexico and the Danish Refugee Council.

The report is structured as follows. First, we present a brief analysis of the migration policies carried out by Mexico and the United States with a special emphasis on policies enacted between January 2022 and June 2024. The next section presents the research results, structured in 1. violence against people on the move, 2. those responsible for this violence, 3. the repercussions of such violence on physical and mental health and 4. the elements that help alleviate these impacts. The report concludes with recommendations and a call to pay greater attention to the intersection between migration policies, violence and vulnerability and the mental health of people on the move.

## II. Context: Binational migration policies between the United States and Mexico

The binational migration policies of the United States and Mexico have had significant impacts on people on the move in Mexico who seek international protection in the United States. During the

Biden administration, the United States opted for a model based on four pillars: 1. Tackling the root causes of migration from Northern Central America, 2. Expanding legal migration pathways, 3. Increasing cooperation with Latin American countries to control migration flows and 4. Restricting access to asylum at the Southern Border.

The Biden administration maintained two programs inherited from the Trump administration that restricted access to asylum: the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) and the application of Title 42. Under MPP, individuals seeking asylum in the United States had to wait on the Mexican side of the border to be able to attend their court date. The application of Title 42 allowed the expulsion of asylum seekers to Mexico or to their country of origin due to the COVID-19 health emergency. The majority of individuals deported to Mexico were Mexican, Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran nationals.<sup>4</sup>

Following the end of the Title 42 restrictions, the United States implemented the Circumvention of Lawful Pathways Rule (CLP) in May 2023. The rule established a presumption of ineligibility to request asylum for those individuals who had not requested asylum in another country and would have had it denied or who crossed the border without prior authorization.

CLP favored the use of the CBP One mobile application, which allowed asylum seekers in certain areas of Mexico to request an appointment to present themselves at United States Ports of Entry and thereby begin the asylum process. 1,450 appointments were made available per day, with some exceptions granted for vulnerable individuals.

In 2024, these limitations on asylum were tightened by the implementation of the Interim Final Rule and the Final Rule "Securing the Border." These rules allowed the Secretary of Homeland Security to suspend the entry of individuals without a CBP One appointment or a valid visa along the Southern Border, including individuals seeking asylum. The suspension came into effect at a moment when encounters reached 2,500 for seven consecutive days and could be lifted only when the average number of encounters was reduced to 1,500 or less for 28 consecutive days. The rules also exempted Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) agents from asking individuals about their fear of being returned or their intention to seek asylum, favoring expedited removals.

In this context, the Biden administration and the government of López Obrador agreed to new measures to increase migration controls in Mexico. They resulted in increased deployment of the Army, Navy, National Guard and agents of the National Immigration Institute (INM, by its acronym in Spanish), whose ranks have mainly been taken over by the military.<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that there are, in total, more than 28,000 agents deployed throughout Mexico to detain people in transit

under the euphemism of humanitarian rescue.<sup>6</sup> This deployment has resulted in a historic level of apprehensions, with approximately 925,000 apprehensions just between January and August 2024,<sup>7</sup> compared to 445,000 in 2022.

Similarly, Mexico accepted the return of Venezuelan, Cuban, Nicaraguan and Haitian nationals following the end of Title 42. According to data obtained by the Institute for Women in Migration (IMUMI, acronym in Spanish), Mexico accepted the return of an estimated 19,500 non-Mexican nationals between May and November 2023 alone.<sup>8</sup> Once returned, INM received them without having any type of humanitarian protection protocol and transported them to Southern Mexico.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of these policies, there were third-country nationals deported from the United States to Mexico, people stranded waiting to seek asylum in the United States, individuals displaced by the INM from Northern to Southern Mexico, and Mexican nationals internally displaced who were prevented from leaving their own country to seek international protection.<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, the vulnerability of people on the move in Mexico has increased and, along with it, the need for psychosocial accompaniment.

### III. Results: Impacts of migration policies and severe crimes on the health of people on the move

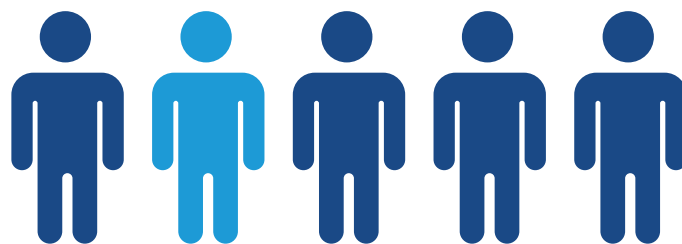
The hardening of the legal migration pathways and the expansion of migration controls have limited the right to seek international protection and pushed migrants towards increasingly invisible spaces. There, they are not only victims of a violent state system but also victims of organized crime. There is no security for people on the move under these circumstances.

Next, we show the reader what are the real conditions under which persons migrated during 2024 through our region:

#### **A. Violence and Severe Crimes**

Interviews revealed a sequence of violence that people on the move face during their journey, particularly during their transit through Mexican territory. **4 out of 5 respondents reported being victims of violence during their migration journeys.** This metric is alarming because it demonstrates that the simple condition of being on the move represents experiencing violence.

**Image 1. Number of people in migratory transit who were victims of violence during their transit interviews in Ciudad Juárez (January-June 2024).**



The most frequently reported crimes were robbery, extortion, discrimination and kidnapping, as is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Number of mentioned crimes suffered by people in mobility interviewed in Ciudad Juárez (January-June 2024)**

| Incident                        | Number of times reported (one person could report more than one) |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Robbery                         | 42   |
| Extortion                       | 29   |
| Discrimination and verbal abuse | 24   |
| Kidnapping                      | 17   |
| Physical and sexual violence    | 11   |
| Forced labor                    | 7  |

**50.6% of the people in Ciudad Juárez who traveled through Mexico to reach the United States were stripped of their belongings**, including identity documents, cellphones and basic belongings. The robbery of their personal belongings has an impact on the legal proceedings they are involved in. Losing a cell phone prevents access to the appointment system of CBP One and communication with families. The theft of identity documents and other legal documents can severely affect a person’s opportunity to prove their asylum cases. Nearly **35% of those interviewed had been victims of extortion.**

The protection monitoring of JRS-DRC shows similar data, with the top crime against people in

forced mobility being extortion/robbery.<sup>11</sup> 67.7% of the 841 families monitored by JRS-DRC since June 2021 in Ciudad Juárez to the end of 2024 were extorted or suffered some kind of robbery. Organized crime and law enforcement agents are the most common extorters. Extortions result in significant economic losses for people on the move, who lose the little money they obtain from informal work or from their families in other countries. For example, more than a third of the people interviewed for this research declared that they had sold their properties, pawned objects, borrowed money from their families or used their savings to migrate.

## **Kidnapping: The increase in the frequency and severity of kidnapping cases**

Kidnappings represent one of the most alarming trends in the violence exerted against people on the move in El Paso-Ciudad Juárez.

**“They had us in cellars, without restrooms and fed us spoiled chicken, they used the water with which they defrosted it to cook it... now I’m sick ”.**

**20.4% of the people we interviewed had been kidnapped**, mostly by organized crime groups. A very serious point is that **30% of survivors report that the kidnapping was with the intervention of Mexican authorities** such as the National Migration Institute (INM), the National Guard, the Mexican army and public security corporations. Data of the DRC-JRS monitoring reveals a similar trend.

**‘The INM turned us over to the cartel, we thought that they would take us to the south, but no, they put us in trucks and then we were kidnapped’**

However, this data is just a tiny representation of reality. Since the conclusion of data collection for this research, we documented an important increase in kidnappings.<sup>12</sup> We have noted an increase in the kidnapping time, with an average of two months of deprivation of liberty. Ransoms vary between \$500 to \$3000 US dollars, and in some cases up to \$20,000 US dollars. Violence against kidnapped persons has also worsened. We registered cases of torture, sexual violence, forced labor, unsanitary conditions and overcrowding, all of which resulted in more severe physical and psychological impacts.



Survivors of kidnappings happening between 2022 and 2023 reported to be kidnapped in a specific area in the north of Durango. However, in 2024, kidnappings became more frequent in the cities of Jimenez, Chihuahua, Samalayuca and Ciudad Juárez. In Ciudad Juárez, kidnappings usually occur on the downtown area, the surroundings of the airport and the bus station and south east of the city.

These findings are alarming if we consider that migration is mostly in family nuclei and a large number of children are being kidnapped and if we pay attention to the involvement of Mexican authorities in many of these cases. This reality should make the United States and Mexico question their migration governance, overfocused on national security without granting security for people on the move.

### ***B. Actors Responsible for Violent Impacts***

Respondents reported that **those primarily responsible for their physical, mental or emotional discomfort were the Mexican migration authorities**, especially the National Migration Institute (INM), **mentioned by 40% of respondents**. For many of the interviewed people, **the cause of their exhaustion and fatigue was the United States and Mexican migration policies**, mentioned by 43% and 38% of respondents, respectively. 26% of surveyed people also mentioned the organized crime as responsible for their distress.

**“The cops rob you, extort you, they blackmail you, they see you with great inferiority, like saying ‘I’m the authority and you can say nothing.’ It is degrading, they threw my food out”**

Those interviewed rarely identified the local community or shelters as the source of their discomfort, nor did they blame their home governments, which were mentioned only in two cases. This does not mean that people did not face difficulties in their home countries or in humanitarian spaces during their transit. Rather, this may indicate that, in transit circumstances, the discontent over the treatment people receive from authorities and criminal groups during their journey surpasses the discontent over the reasons they had to migrate.

More than **60% of the respondents reported that transit through México was “hard or very hard.”**



“I would rather pass through the jungle (Darién) 20 times than pass through Mexico one more time”

### C. Impacts on the Health of People on the Move

The violence described before shows us the socially tolerated cruelty when we speak about migration. One of the main impacts of such violence is physical decrement. For example, the group of interviewed people who used the train as transportation reported dehydration, burns, starvation, and in extreme cases, serious injuries to their limbs or amputations. In the same way, conditions in places in transit, like subpar shelters, worsen the physical health of people on the move. For example, bad food, insalubrity in some spaces, hard and risky work to obtain money, or even the lack of medical attention worsen health issues that often start during the migration journey.

Interviewed individuals reported weight loss (60% of those interviewed), muscle pains (47%), loss of energy and hair (44%) and a lack of appetite (38.6%). One out of three reported diarrhea due to the insalubrity of shelters, the bad condition of food and stress; meanwhile, two out of three reported constant headaches.

#### Impacts on physical health

- 60% reported weight loss
- 47% experienced muscle pains
- 2 out of 3 experienced constant headaches
- 1 out of 3 reported suffering from diarrhea
- 44% experienced hair loss and no energy
- Almost 40% of the people reported loss of appetite

“I feel physically and mentally exhausted”

Similar factors also lead to severe psychosocial impacts. **60.2% of the people interviewed expressed suffering from depression.** More than half of the respondents said that they were experiencing fear, frustration, fatigue, constant worry and nervousness. **One out of three reported**

**experiencing intrusive thoughts, and a minority (6%) claimed to have suicidal thoughts.** The migration journey brought loneliness for some, with **one out of four saying they felt isolated or alone**, whereas close to 35% reported feeling low self-esteem and helplessness.

**Three out of four reported that this psycho-emotional condition first occurred during their migration journeys.** In other words, nearly no one experienced any of these symptoms in their country of origin.

## Impacts on Mental Health

- 60.2% reported suffering from depression
- More than 50% reported experiencing fear, frustration, fatigue, constant worry and nervousness
- 35% reported experiencing low self-esteem and helplessness
- One out of four reported feeling isolated or alone
- One out of three reported having intrusive thoughts
- 6% reported suicidal thoughts

There are multiple reasons for these symptoms. The systemic violence endured during the migration journey and the experience of deprivation lead to a temporary loss of meaning in life and a lack of hope of improving one's health. In addition, the lack of justice and meaningful remedy for human rights abuses, others' disregard for one's pain, and the growing dehumanization for being someone on the move are also contributing factors to the worsening of one's health.

**“People do not see me as a person; I have stopped feeling like a person”**

## Testimony of a psychologist in Ciudad Juárez: the reality of those who accompany people on the move

“I am a psychologist and I accompany people on the move who arrive at this border fleeing hunger, violence, precariousness, political unrest, natural disasters and multiple and constant violations and injustices experienced, either in their places of origin and/or in other countries, on the move searching better living conditions for themselves and their families, and with the dream of one day experiencing a dignified life that allows them to develop as people and provide for their families.

However, what they find on their migration journeys is a desolate panorama, facing an endless number of risks from beginning to end. People on the move navigate a harsh reality that threatens their lives and their physical, emotional and psychological health. The risks they face range from being stigmatized to being victims of serious crimes that terribly and profoundly affect their lives.

Overcoming these conditions is complicated, needing to overcome barriers such as policies, the ineffectiveness of the public authorities and violent migration processes that re-victimize them.

As a psychologist, companion, woman and citizen of the world, this is my invitation to you: Pay attention to the mental health of women, men, girls, boys and adolescents who are on the move, as well as that of their families, companions, human rights defenders, shelter staff and communities who welcome them.”

#### ***D. Elements That Help People on the Move Find Respite***

As in other contexts, the human way to overcome some of these extremely violent situations is through **faith and community**. Significantly, **70% of respondents mentioned that prayer and faith helped them overcome some of these impacts**, closely followed by being in community and talking with others, which 55% of respondents mentioned.

One out of four people said that using social media and sleeping were part of their soothing efforts. In a way, social media helps one feel closer to one’s roots, loved ones, and those who were left behind. However, 15% of the interviewees indicated that they ignored some of the above-mentioned symptoms, which points to the necessity of close accompaniment.

## **The response of the Hope Border Institute and the Jesuit Refugee Service Mexico**

Through the Border Refugee Assistance Fund, co-financed by the Diocese of El Paso, HOPE works with the Jesuit Refugee Service Mexico to provide psychosocial accompaniment services. Thanks to this border collaboration, highly qualified psychologists provide free services to people in situations of high vulnerability, especially to people forcibly displaced.

The offered services include the creation of safe listening spaces in shelters and other humanitarian spaces, individual psychosocial accompaniment sessions and psychological support for survivors of gender-based violence, torture and kidnapping. Depending on their needs, people are also referred to humanitarian and legal services.

Just in the first few months of 2024, more than 261 people received psychosocial attention, being able to start healing processes after the violence suffered during their migration journey.

## IV. Recommendations: Community Responsibility for Those Most Vulnerable

Reverting these violent trends and finding remedy for the impacts on the health and rights of people on the move demand a concerted response.

We must first examine the true causes of the social upheavals forcing many to migrate. Then, we should critically evaluate the socio-political structures with which transit and destination countries are responding to migration. Beyond the debate about whether the number of border encounters is “high” or not, we need to examine the consequences of the immigration policies being implemented to reduce these numbers.

We firmly believe that the urgency lies not in the number of encounters or apprehensions at the US-Mexico border but rather in the dehumanizing and violent conditions that our policies are causing.

We must re-humanize migration and center migrants in our actions and policies. Therefore, we recommend:

1. Host Communities:
  - a. To adopt a dignified approach to migration; it is urgent that local communities welcome people on the move as equals.
  - b. To learn the stories of why people need to move and which conditions they navigate during their migration journeys.

- 2.** United States Government:
  - a. To stop pressuring the Mexican government to detain and return vulnerable individuals.
  - b. To restore access to asylum at its Southern border and work to expand legal migration pathways.
  
- 3.** Mexican Government:
  - a. To stop the militarization of migration governance.
  - b. To reject the efforts of border externalization by the United States.
  - c. To develop care protocols for people on the move who are survivors of serious crimes.
  - d. To reevaluate the admission criteria for legal stay for people on the move as well as more broadly interpret shelter admissibility criteria.
  - e. To increase support for humanitarian and psychosocial support services for people in vulnerable situations, including for people on the move.
  
- 4.** Churches and Faith Communities:
  - a. The pastoral and hierarchical leadership of churches should be more involved in the care of people on the move, as well as the reporting of violence against them.
  - b. To encourage a culture of hospitality at the community level.
  - c. To strengthen the technical capacities of pastoral services for people on the move.
  
- 5.** The Academic Community:
  - a. To document and investigate long-standing processes of violence linked to human mobility.
  - b. To facilitate connections with judicial authorities to create new judgment and remedy mechanisms for crimes committed against people on the move.
  
- 6.** Civil Society Organizations:
  - a. To strengthen advocacy and psychosocial care capabilities.
  - b. To train collaborators to accompany survivors of human rights violations and serious crimes.
  - c. To prioritize the care of collaborators against burnout and post-traumatic stress.

## V. Conclusions

One of the main temptations when faced with the news of tragedies involving people on the move is to believe that they occur due to the personal decision to migrate or that the fault for suffering violence lies with the person who suffers it, particularly if the movement is “irregular.” Such a discourse re-victimizes people and obscures the underlying conditions and policies that cause violence against people on the move in the first place.

Through interviews with 83 family units, representing more than 170 people, this report demonstrates that migration policies and their impacts on migration trajectories have devastating consequences for migrants, including severe impacts on their physical and mental health. However, the sampling that gave life to this report only reflects a small portion of what happens in the lives of so many who decide to migrate to the United States border with Mexico.

It is urgent that we critically examine our commitment to caring for one another. Governments and civil society must come together to reverse course in our migration governance so that policies respect the dignity, physical health and psychosocial health of people on the move.

## Endnotes

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The Hope Border Institute (HOPE) brings the perspective of Catholic social teaching to bear on the realities unique to our US-Mexico border region. Through a robust program of research and policy work, leadership development and action, we work to build justice and deepen solidarity across the borderlands.

The Jesuit Refugee Service Mexico (JRS MX) is an initiative of the Society of Jesus with presence in Mexico that focuses on human mobility. Our mission is to accompany, serve and defend people in forced mobility so they can heal, learn and determine their own future as political and human agents.

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