

# Re-Building a Complex Partnership:

The Outlook for U.S.-Mexico  
Relations under the Biden  
Administration



By Andrew Selee, Andrea Tanco, & Ariel G. Ruiz Soto

# Setting the Course Toward Sustainable Migration Cooperation: Levering Bilateral Opportunities



**Few issues present greater cooperation opportunities for both Mexico and the United States, as well as potential pitfalls in the bilateral relationship, than migration.**

## Key Policy Recommendations

- Put migrants at the center of economic recovery. Immigration can be an asset that benefits the economic recovery process as well as strengthens and renews the social fabric of both countries.
- Expand legal migration pathways from Central America, which currently are extremely limited.
- Reform and enhance humanitarian protection, including investing in protection mechanisms and restoring access to asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border.
- Professionalize transparent and rule-based migration enforcement. Enforcement efforts should be aligned with the highest standards of rule of law, professionalism, and transparency.
- Invest in economic and institutional development. Mexico and the United States have a unique window of opportunity to complement and harmonize their investments in economic development and rule of law in the region as means to address the drivers of migration over the long term.

Few issues present greater cooperation opportunities for both Mexico and the United States, as well as potential pitfalls in the bilateral relationship, than migration. With nearly eleven million Mexicans in the United States<sup>1</sup> and over a million U.S. citizens in Mexico,<sup>2</sup> the movement of people between the two countries has unequivocally reshaped both societies. Yet, recent increases in irregular migration flows from Central America, the Caribbean, South America, as well as Africa and Asia, have challenged policymakers in both countries and stretched the bilateral relationship in new directions.

Managing the transit of irregular flows through Mexico and into the United States has been the long-standing pillar of bilateral migration cooperation, escalating tensions in both countries over the last few years. The Trump administration ramped up enforcement at the U.S.-Mexico border, and implemented a series of interlocking policies limiting access to the U.S. asylum system.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, it coerced the Mexican government with export tariffs to increase migration controls and security in its interior and at its southern border. These measures, combined with other mobility restrictions to contain the spread of COVID-19, effectively discouraged irregular flows throughout most of 2020. However, as some mobility restrictions were eased throughout the region, and the negative effects of the global economic crisis exacerbated migration factors, irregular migration flows started to pick up late in 2020 and into 2021. This enforcement-only approach has generated both legal questions and significant resource costs for both countries, while deterring irregular flows only over the short term and without addressing the root causes of irregular migration. Yet, the start of a new U.S. administration provides an opportunity to shift to a more holistic strategy—one based on cooperation that is more effective, humane, and consistent with their mutual values, and promotes a safe, orderly, and regular flow of migrants. This policy window opens the possibility for both governments to engage in areas of collaboration that have remained on the sidelines in the past.

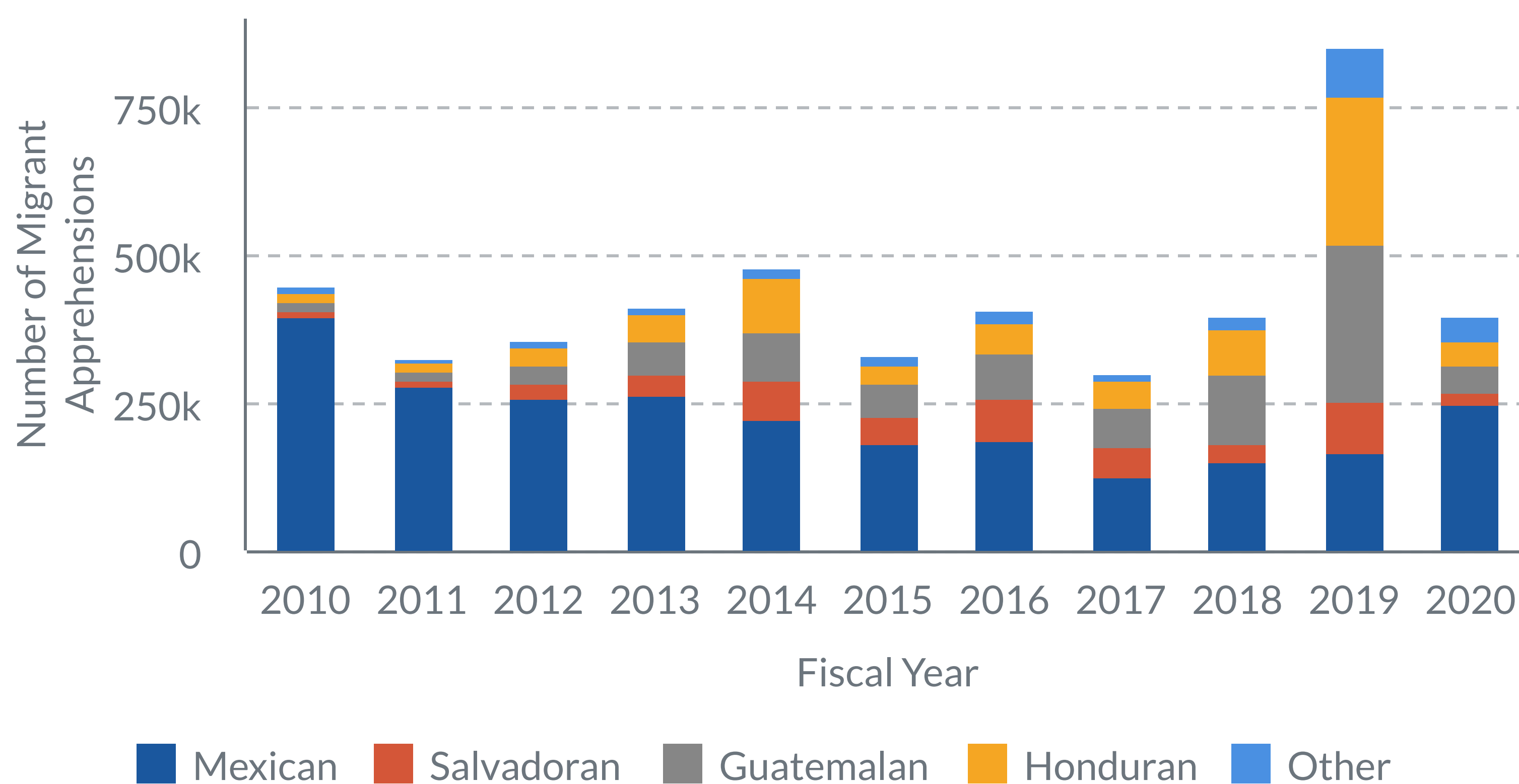
This chapter recapitulates the evolution of U.S.-Mexico migration policy during the Trump administration. It then identifies four areas for bilateral cooperation on migration management that would benefit both countries, including: putting migrants at the center of economic recovery; developing legal pathways for Central Americans; reforming and enhancing humanitarian protection; professionalization of border enforcement; and investing in economic and institutional development.

## **The Evolution of U.S.-Mexico Migration Policy**

As irregular migration from Mexico to the United States gradually decreased over the last decade, U.S.-Mexico collaboration on migration policy has centered on reducing irregular flows seeking to enter the United States. While responding to waves of large migration flows have commonly led to prioritizing migration enforcement over planned strategies to proactively manage migration, bilateral collaboration under the Trump administration marked a distinct era in *how* migration enforcement was conducted in both countries.

Shortly after taking office in December 2018, the López Obrador administration aimed to promote safe, orderly, and legal migration by creating legal entry pathways for migrants, complemented by targeted economic investments to address the root causes of irregular migration in Central America. Confronted in February 2019 by migrants traveling in caravans with an unprecedented number of families and children primarily from Honduras, the López Obrador administration responded by issuing more than 18,000 humanitarian visas to promote migrants' safety and facilitate their access to basic services in Mexico.<sup>4</sup>

However, the number of irregular migrants continued into Spring 2019, triggering pressure from the Trump administration to strengthen migration controls in Mexico and the López Obrador administration adopted a new approach that more heavily prioritized enforcement. This approach focused on containing migrants at Mexico's southern border with Guatemala and the nearby Isthmus of Tehuantepec—a choke point for migrants headed northward to the United States. Despite these efforts, irregular migration continued to grow, reaching its highest levels in 13 years and further straining the U.S.-Mexico relationship.

**Figure 1. Migrant Apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexico Border, by Citizenship, FY 2010-2020**

Sources: U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Border Security Metrics Report (Washington, DC: DHS, 2018), 46; U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), “U.S. Border Patrol Nationwide Apprehensions by Citizenship and Sector,” accessed October 9, 2020; CBP, “U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehensions by Sector Fiscal Year 2020,” accessed October 15, 2020.

To avoid the imposition of tariffs on Mexican goods, both governments signed a joint declaration in June 2019, pledging to collaborate to manage and reduce irregular migration from Central America. Setting a new phase in the development of Mexico’s enforcement system, the López Obrador administration activated its newly established National Guard to assist in migration enforcement. At the same time, U.S. asylum and detention policies that were not part of the agreement also had an inextricable influence on Mexican migration policies. Key among them is interlocking U.S. policies that narrow asylum eligibility at the U.S.-Mexico border, such as the Migration Protection Protocols, known as “Remain in Mexico”, the metering process, and shift responsibility for processing protection claims to Mexico and other governments, notably through bilateral agreements known as Asylum Cooperation Agreements, signed with El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras in July through September 2019.

The COVID-19 pandemic that hit the region in early 2020 has led to further agreements on mobility and migration between the two countries, with important implications for Mexico’s migration policies and institutions. These have included restrictions on nonessential, legal border crossings and an agreement under which the U.S. government returns unauthorized Mexican and Central American migrants arriving at the border to Mexico through a substantially expedited process under a CDC rule based on U.S. Code Title 42 due to concerns about the spread of the coronavirus.

All these measures combined, along with national restrictions on mobility in Central America, discouraged irregular migration and reduced monthly apprehensions significantly from the high point in June 2018. However, there are signs that irregular migration is beginning to rise again as the effects of the economic crisis create new incentives for people to travel north.

These signs suggest that enforcement-only approaches are not sufficient to detain irregular migration. Furthermore, these enforcement-only approaches have required the U.S. government to abandon its obligations to provide access to asylum, and has brought the government into questionable legal terrain. At the same time, it has forced the Mexican government to dedicate significant percentage of the elements from the National Guard to border enforcement, rather than addressing other public security concerns.

While irregular migration will continue to be a key issue in the bilateral agenda, an enforcement-only approach may work for short periods, but it is likely to be unsustainable. However, the United States and Mexico have the opportunity to recur to another approach that manages these flows effectively and that is beneficial for both countries.

## A sustainable approach towards migration management.

### Migrants at the Center of Economic Growth

Over 13 percent of the population in the United States was born in another country, with almost a quarter of the immigrant population born in Mexico.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, immigrants in the United States have long been drivers of innovation, entrepreneurship, and labor force growth.<sup>6</sup> But with roughly a quarter of all immigrants lacking legal immigration status, including almost half of all Mexican immigrants, their productivity and potential contributions to the economy are limited. Having legal status would provide more of them flexibility in the labor market and afford them greater opportunity to invest in education and training—in addition to many other opportunities to contribute to the social and political fabric of their communities.

As the U.S. government tries to pull the economy out of the worldwide recession, regularizing the status of those immigrants who have already integrated into U.S. society and are contributing to the economy makes eminent sense, since it will help generate greater economic productivity. There are already significant discussions underway on how to extend permanent legal status to those immigrants who came to the United States as children, including many of the 646,000 youth are protected under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.<sup>7</sup> However, there is an even larger universe of approximately 3.4 million who arrived unauthorized as children and could be included in legislation to create a permanent path to legal status for this population.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, individuals protected by Temporary Protected Status (TPS)—primarily those from El Salvador, Haiti, and Honduras who have been in the country for decades with some form of legal protection—might be considered within the same legislation for permanent status.

In addition, there are 1.6 million unauthorized immigrants, including a large percentage of whom are Mexican, who are married to U.S. citizens and would be eligible to adjust to lawful permanent residence (e.g., green card) if not for a restriction in U.S. immigration law that makes it impossible for those who entered the United States unauthorized and without inspection to adjust status in the country. Another 675,000 unauthorized immigrants are married to lawful permanent residents and face the same problem.<sup>9</sup> Changing this would ensure that mixed status families, which already have a U.S.-citizen family member, do not face the threat of family separation and can progress economically. Similar discussions could consider the 6.6 million unauthorized immigrants who have been in the country for more than ten years, including 4.2 million Mexicans, and those who are “essential workers” to create pathways to provide them with legal status.<sup>10</sup>

There are also enormous opportunities to support the effective integration of immigrants, regardless of legal status, in the U.S. education system and workforce through targeted attention to the needs of English language learners and immigrant workers who received their education and training abroad.<sup>11</sup> All of these policy changes would benefit not only the immigrants themselves who are affected, but the larger society as a whole, especially on the road to economic recovery after COVID-19.

In Mexico, addressing the legal status and integration challenges faced by Mexican returnees and the broader immigrant population presents a similar opportunity for economic growth. Approximately 1 million Mexicans returned from the United States from 2009 to 2014,<sup>12</sup> and a similar number of Mexicans were repatriated by U.S. immigration authorities between 2015 through 2019.<sup>13</sup> Mexican returnees represent a unique pool of talent as they bring language skills, work and multicultural experience, and channeling their skillset and experience into targeted employment sectors can contribute to the socioeconomic development of the country while reducing the pressures to migrate again. However, whether returning voluntarily or involuntarily, many returnees face various challenges upon their arrival in Mexico, including lacking valid or updated identity documents—such as birth certificates, voting ID, and unique population registry code (CURP)—which limits their access to almost all basic services and government programs.<sup>14</sup> Due to a combination of structural barriers and lack of social networks, they are often unable to access high-paying jobs or employ the skills they learned in the U.S.

In many cases, Mexican returnees bring along their U.S.-born children, who face their own integration barriers. As of 2015, there were approximately 600,000 minors born in the United States but residing in Mexico<sup>15</sup> and 30,000 of them lacked proper identity documentation.<sup>16</sup> It is the first time living in Mexico for many of them and thus one of their main challenges is navigating the Mexican education system. Language barriers, differences in academic curriculums and transcript requirements, as well as the lack of social networks and discrimination in the classroom, hamper these children's educational achievement in Mexican schools.<sup>17</sup>

Mexico has previously attempted to tackle some of the barriers faced by Mexican returnees and binational children through changes in Mexico's national legislation. For example, in 2015 the Mexican government removed the apostille requirement for foreign academic transcripts to enroll in the Mexican public school system.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, Mexico and the United States have launched various binational programs, such as: "Somos Mexicanos" (*We are Mexican*), "Binational Program for the Education of Migrants," (*Programa Binacional de Educación Migrante*), "Educación Básica sin Fronteras" (Basic Education without Borders), ¡Documentate Ya! (*Get Documented!*), and "Soy México, Registro de Nacimiento de la Población Mexico-Americana (*I am Mexico, Birth Registration of the Mexican-American Population*).<sup>19</sup> However, the implementation of these legislative changes remains a challenge at the state and local level. Some of these binational programs also have not received enough financial resources or are outdated.<sup>20</sup> It is likely that these binational children will return to the United States in the future for college or for employment to support their families in Mexico.<sup>21</sup> Thus, it is in the best interest of both the United States and Mexico to strengthen these programs and set the binational population up for success.

Tackling the integration barriers faced by Mexican returnees and U.S.-born children in Mexico could also benefit other migrants and refugees in the country. In recent years, Mexico has also witnessed an increase on migration from Central America. As entry to the United States and its asylum system became more restricted under the Trump administration, migrants from Haiti, Cuba, Asia, and Africa have either decided to settle Mexico or wait for a prolonged period of time until they can proceed to the United States.<sup>22</sup> While some of these migrants, primarily from Central America, have requested asylum in Mexico, others lack a legal pathway to regularize their immigration status, which in turn hinders access to basic services and sustainable livelihood opportunities in Mexico.<sup>23</sup> Despite having a robust legal framework on migration, Mexico's capacity to ensure its compliance and implementation has been limited.<sup>24</sup> Although the needs of each other's nationals will continue to be a top priority in the bilateral agenda, the United States and Mexico could also brainstorm how to replicate programs or include these migrant and refugee populations, so they are able to succeed in Mexico and have less incentives to eventually migrate north.

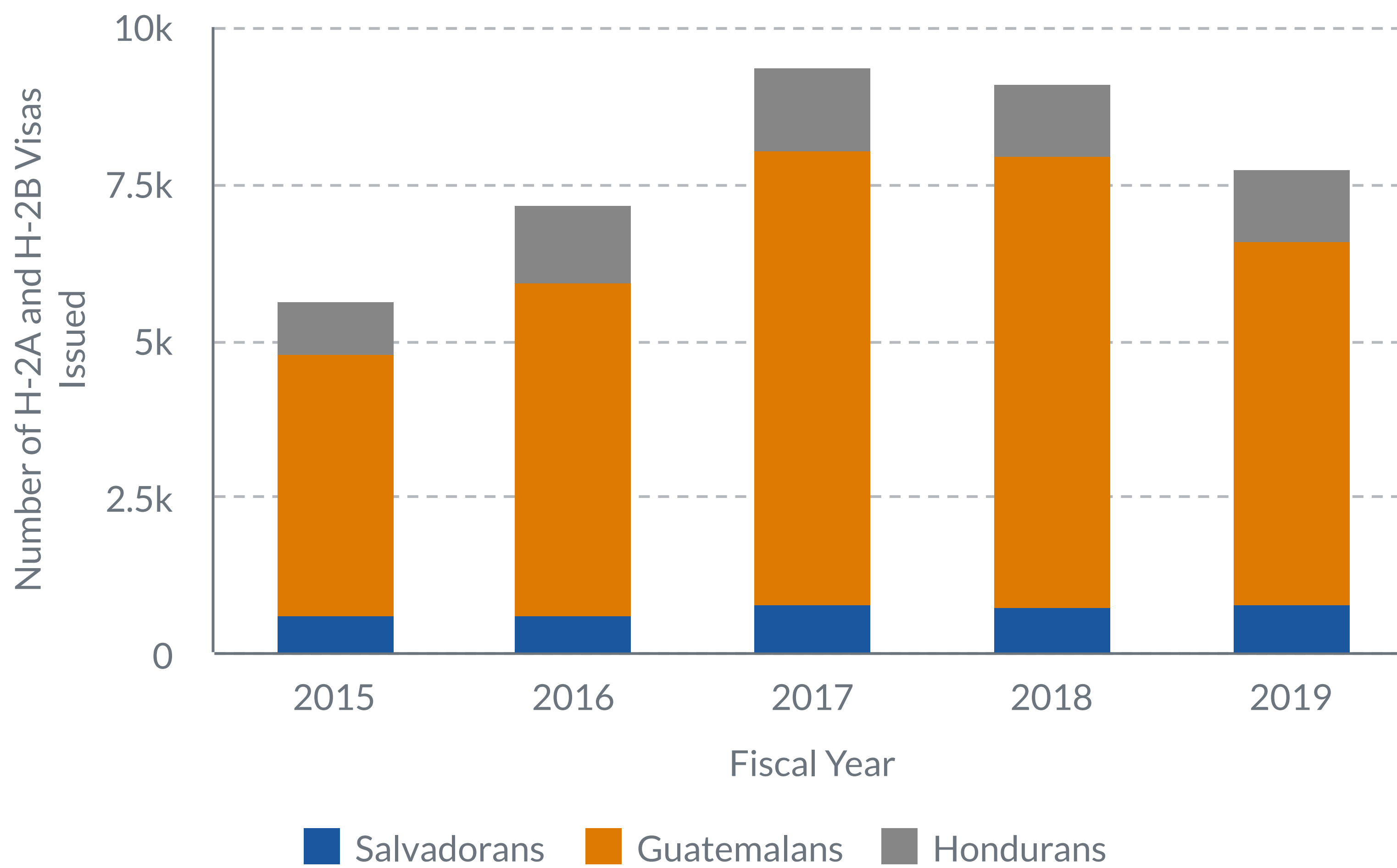
Mexicans are just now coming to terms with the impact that migration is having on their societies. Meanwhile, most people in the United States are deeply aware of profound immigrant heritage of the country. Yet, recent U.S. policies have largely categorized immigration as a threat rather than an opportunity. As Mexico and the United States emerge out of the global recession, immigration can be an asset that benefits the economic recovery process as well as strengthens and renews the social fabric of both countries. It is likely that deterring irregular migration will continue to present a challenge to bilateral cooperation, but there are opportunities to manage this effectively and strategically so that the two countries can move towards flows that are increasingly safe, orderly, and regular.

## **Expanding Legal Migration Pathways from Central America**

Any attempt to address unauthorized migration flows coming from Central America needs to start by expanding legal channels for migration, which currently are extremely limited. Otherwise, the mix of demographic, wage, employment, and governance pressures will continue to push people towards Mexico and the United States, especially as the economies recover from the global recession and labor markets again have demand for new workers.

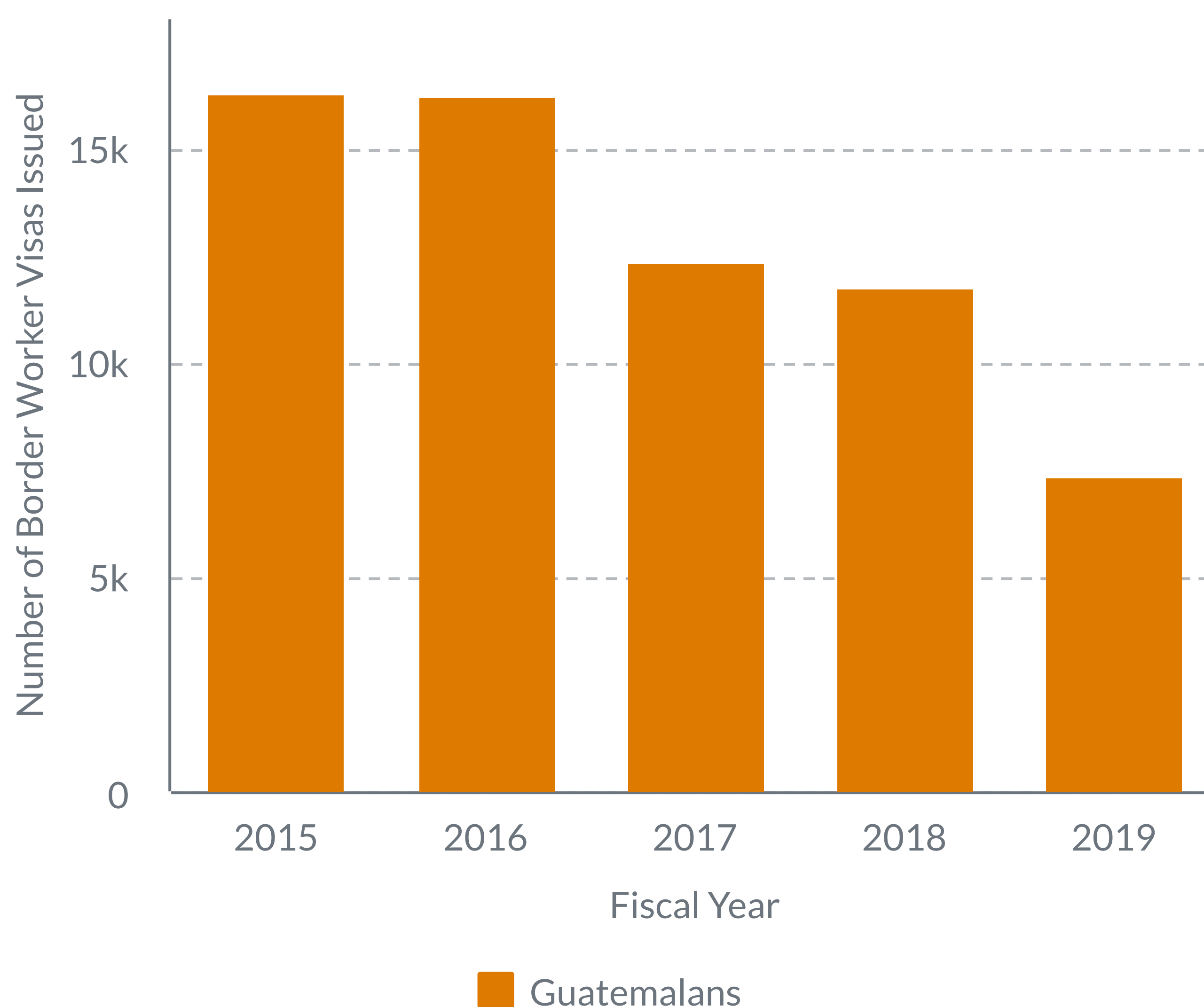
But without a dedicated focus on labor pathways in the United States, only about 8,000 Central Americans accessed the H-2A and H-2B visa programs for seasonal labor in agriculture, services, and manufacturing during fiscal year 2019 (see Figure 2), as compared with 260,000 Mexicans in the same period.<sup>25</sup> And while tens of thousands of Guatemalans have access to regional work visas that allow them to do seasonal work in southern Mexico (see Figure 3), there are relatively few who can access visas to work in the areas of Mexico that normally have significant labor shortages, especially the industrial triangle and the regions of export-agriculture. Absent these opportunities, most Central Americans can only hope to work in Mexico or the United States by using irregular channels to migrate.

**Figure 2. Number of H-2A and H-2B Visas Issued to Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans in the United States, FY 2015-2019**



Source: U.S. Department of State, [“Nonimmigrant Visa Issuances by Visa Class and by Nationality,”](#) accessed January 17, 2021.

**Figure 3. Number of Border Worker Visas Issued to Guatemalans in Mexico, FY 2015-2019**



Sources: Mexican Interior Ministry (SEGOB), [http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es/PoliticaMigratoria/Boletines\\_Estadisticos](http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es/PoliticaMigratoria/Boletines_Estadisticos), accessed May 17, 2020.

The United States needs to work closely with governments in Central America to ensure transparent and trustworthy pipelines of workers who are eligible for existing visas and to encourage employers to look further south, especially for agricultural recruitment. Others have recommended establishing bilateral agreements with El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to train workers in in-demand skills that are mutually beneficial for both countries, with the ability for some of these workers to migrate to the United States.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, it may be possible to reform the existing seasonal worker programs in the future to include a regional component that encourages hiring workers in Mexico and Central America, but in the short-term efforts need to be focused at creating incentives for U.S. employers to look further south. Fortunately, some of these efforts have already started and can be ramped up.

In Mexico, because border worker visas are currently only available for Guatemalan and Belizean citizens, considerations are underway to authorize Salvadoran and Honduran citizens to qualify for these visas. However, equally as important is facilitating access to work-based visas for employers in the industrial triangle and in export agriculture that want to recruit Central American workers, at least in the period after COVID-19 subsides and the Mexican economy returns to a pattern of growth. Mexico's migration framework already provides a mechanism to obtain temporary legal residency for employment reasons, but Central American migrants make up only a small share of recipients.<sup>27</sup> And although the framework also provides the authority to institute a points system to facilitate specialized and high skilled migration, the system has yet to be established due to lagging government regulation.

Access to visas that allow for work in seasonal occupations in the most dynamic regions of the United States and Mexico will not stop irregular migration, of course, but over time, they could create opportunities for legal migration that can replace some of the irregular channels that are currently the only option that most Central Americans face.

## Reforming Humanitarian Protection

Many of the efforts of the Trump administration to slow unauthorized migration centered on measures to restrict access to asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border since asylum began to be used actively as a way for many migrants to enter the United States and stay, whether or not they had a strong claim to humanitarian protection.<sup>28</sup> In fact, statistics recently released by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS)'s Office of Immigration Statistics show that most Central Americans who entered the United States between 2014 and 2019 neither received asylum or other relief nor were repatriated to their countries of origin.<sup>29</sup>

Undoubtedly, the sclerotic nature of the U.S. asylum system allowed people without strong claims to remain in the country for years before their claim was addressed by the immigration courts, while those with need for protection also had few options for attaining it within a reasonable period. But the set of policies implemented by the Trump Administration to address this issue, such as the Migration Protection Protocols (known as Remain in Mexico), the transit-country asylum ban, the Prompt Asylum Case Review Program, and the Humanitarian Asylum Review Process (HARP),<sup>30</sup> required the U.S. government to abandon its primary obligations under international law and brought it into questionable legal terrain.<sup>31</sup>

It is likely that these policies will remain in place until the lawsuits move through the U.S. court system (except for the transit-country asylum ban, which has already been enjoined).<sup>32</sup> However, restoring access to asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border will be imperative to ensure it fulfills its obligations within U.S and international law, and abides to its leadership role in the development of the international humanitarian system after World War II. To make the U.S. asylum system work efficiently and fairly, the government could streamline processes by allowing asylum officers to make the final decisions on requests for protection, rather than using the overburdened immigration court system. This approach requires sufficient resourcing, and would ideally be paired with offering legal counsel to asylum-seekers, a case management



system for those awaiting final decisions or appeals on the cases.<sup>33</sup> Finally, those whose cases are denied, could receive predeparture information on reintegration services before they are repatriated to their countries of origin.<sup>34</sup>

The past four years under the Trump administration have reiterated how impactful changes on U.S. immigration policy and at the U.S.-Mexico border can be for Mexico. As the Trump administration restricted access to the U.S. asylum system, Mexico's asylum applications soared. Since 2014 Mexico has received approximately 171,000 asylum applications, with 66 percent of these applications submitted in 2019 and 2020.<sup>35</sup> The Mexican government has made efforts to strengthen the capacity of Mexico's Refugee Agency (COMAR) by doubling its budget and staffing.<sup>36</sup> Although approval rates have increased from 49 percent to 71 percent from 2018 to 2020,<sup>37</sup> the agency still faces significant bottlenecks and logistical needs to timely process cases.<sup>38</sup> The U.S. government could support Mexico's asylum system through international organizations, which have played a role in enhancing its capacity, and both governments could work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to determine if there are asylum-seekers in Mexico whose case could be handled better in the United States (either as asylees or resettled refugees), particularly those who might still be in imminent danger in Mexico.<sup>39</sup> The Mexican Congress is currently debating a bill on internally displaced people (IDPs) that if signed into law would make COMAR responsible for recognizing those who were forced to leave their homes due to violence.<sup>40</sup> The U.S. government and Mexico could also find avenues to support this effort to reduce the pressure from IDPs in Mexico to migrate abroad.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, whether at the U.S.-Mexico or Mexico-Guatemalan border, requesting asylum should be the last resort for people seeking protection, not the first approach. There are significant opportunities for the United States and Mexico to invest together in protection mechanisms in Mexico and Central America to identify and protect those who are being persecuted before they have to migrate, so that they can either be protected within their countries or transferred to another country as refugees. This could be done by working with asylum agencies in the region and UNCHR and channeling some asylum seekers into the refugee resettlement program. Other approaches include enhancing the Protection Transfer Agreement administered by UNCHR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM)<sup>42</sup> or relaunching the Central American Minors (CAM) Refugee and Parole Program.<sup>43</sup>

## **Professionalizing Transparent and Rule-Based Migration Enforcement**

Enforcement of existing immigration laws, including restrictions on irregular crossings at or between ports of entry, will have to remain a central strategy for both governments as a means of ensuring safety, order, and legality at their borders. However, enforcement efforts should be aligned with the highest standards of rule of law, professionalism, and transparency. These efforts should also be adjusted to ensure that they use the minimum of force necessary, abide by both domestic and international law standards, and take added precautions in the treatment of minors.

The current enforcement regime at the U.S.-Mexico border illustrates the mismatch between policies, laws and resources and the today's migration flows, which are mostly comprised largely by families and unaccompanied children seeking protection and some economic migrants, rather than when young, male adults who migrated in search of employment opportunities as seen through the 1990s.<sup>44</sup> Considering this shifting trend, there is an urgent need to develop the infrastructure and cross-agency process to handle the nature of current migration flows. Besides revamping the U.S. asylum system, U.S. Customs

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and Border Protection and U.S. Immigration Enforcement centers could be transformed into multiagency reception centers. These centers would provide initial screening, refer apprehended migrants to the appropriate agency, and provide a range of services including legal counsel, family services and medical assistance.<sup>45</sup>

The United States could also benefit by returning to guidelines for interior enforcement that prioritize those with significant criminal histories or who present a threat to national security, but not those immigrants in the country who are contributing productively to the society, regardless of immigration status.

While robust enforcement will continue to be key to confront illegal activity along the U.S.-Mexico border, border management cannot be achieved through an enforcement-only approach. Given the complexity of the mission and the nature of today's flows, it is critical to consider other functions of the U.S. government and cooperation with regional partners, including Mexico.<sup>46</sup>

In the case of Mexico, the Mexican government should continue to institutionalize the functioning and enhance the operations of the National Institute of Migration (INM). This might include redesigning INM to better handle its dual responsibilities for border and migration management and visa processing.<sup>47</sup> Though, in a welcoming development, the Mexican government announced it would upgrade INM's technology, double staffing capacity, digitalize administrative processes, and enhance the interoperability of the National Migration Registry.<sup>48</sup> However, corruption allegations and human rights abuses by INM officers continue to be a challenge.<sup>49</sup>

At the same time, since the National Guard began to support INM's migration control operations, there have been multiple confrontations between the National Guard, migration agents, and migrants travelling in caravans through the Mexico-Guatemala border and at checkpoints along transit which have raised similar human rights concerns. During the first five months of operations, the Mexican National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) received complaints of alleged human rights violations against migrants by the National Guard.<sup>50</sup> If the National Guard will continue to play a supporting role in border control, policymakers and stakeholders should consider creating a dedicated unit of the National Guard that is professionally trained in border enforcement and human rights, as is the case with the National Police in France, Spain, and Sweden.

Finally, one of the pending challenges in the region is combating large-scale smuggling organizations and their ties to the legal economy.<sup>51</sup> While operations focus on front-line smugglers, there is a need to map large networks and their financial and logistical opportunity to tackle the challenge systematically. This represents a major opportunity for cooperation not only for the United States and Mexico, but with other partners across the region.<sup>52</sup>

## **Investing in Development and Rule of Law**

Mexico and the United States have a unique window of opportunity to complement and harmonize their investments in economic development and rule of law in the region as means to address the drivers of migration over the long term. The López Obrador administration proposed early in its tenure an ambitious effort to invest in southern Mexico and Central America to creating the conditions for economic growth and development that would obviate the need for people to migrate. With supervision from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL), the Comprehensive Development Plan for El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Southern Mexico rests on four pillars: economic development, social wellbeing, environmental sustainability, and migration.<sup>53</sup> While the Plan is in its nascent stages to evaluate its progress, it seeks to implement over 100 projects that would cost a total of \$45 billion dollars over five years with international assistance.<sup>54</sup>

Building on previous experience with the Obama administration, the incoming Biden administration has similarly proposed a robust effort to invest in Central America to generate development, reduce poverty, and build rule of law, including an ambitious campaign against corruption that empowers local civil society.<sup>55</sup> The comprehensive strategy seeks to invest \$4 billion dollars over four years, primarily through civil social organizations and marshalling private sector investment to supplement government funds.

By combining efforts, Mexico and the United States can magnify their impact in the short- and long-term. Though the focus of the investment should be Central American countries, identifying programs and services along the U.S.-Mexico border and Mexican cities along common migration routes can help further develop local infrastructure necessary to address migrants' needs and spur settlement and integration. But for investment collaboration to be fruitful and sustainable, it needs to be driven by realistic expectations and evaluation mechanisms to adjust investment strategies as conditions change in the region. Programs that target populations at-risk of migration will likely focus on youth and working-age populations seeking economic opportunities, but it will need to reach rural areas beyond the city centers where resources are more readily available.

It will be equally as imperative to coordinate and communicate closely with the governments of Central America, including not only those of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, but also Costa Rica. And implementing transparent mechanisms to observe and measure impact on the livelihood of would-be migrants will be essential from the beginning of cooperation, as these elements limited progress under similar efforts under the Obama and Peña Nieto administrations.

Other investment possibilities include supporting migrant remittances as an investment strategy in country of origin. In partnership with governments, financial institutions, and international development actors, incentives for migrants to invest in local business would benefit communities and the economies of each country.

## Conclusion

The incoming Biden administration has similarly proposed a robust effort to invest in Central America to generate development and to build rule of law, including an ambitious campaign against corruption that empowers local civil society. The two governments have a unique window of opportunity to lead an international campaign to ensure long-term changes in Central America that help alter the calculations that people make about the need to migrate.

Much of this agenda needs to be coordinated closely with the governments of Central America, including not only those of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, but also Costa Rica, but some of the efforts will require working directly with civil society organizations, the business community, and other actors on the ground.

There are also major opportunities to develop local infrastructure in communities within Mexico that see frequent migration flows and often become places where migrants settle down when they decide that they cannot reach their intended destination. This is particularly true in the cities adjacent to the northern and southern borders of Mexico, as well as some cities along common migration routes.

## Endnotes

[1] Emma Israel and Jeanne Batalova, [Mexican Immigrants in the United States](#), Migration Information Source, November 5, 2020.

[2] In 2015, according to Mexico’s most recent official census, U.S. citizens made up 73 percent of the one million immigrants living in Mexico, although other estimates suggest this figure could be as large as 1.5 million. For more on these estimates by Mexican and U.S. sources, see Andrew Selee, Silvia E. Giorguli-Saucedo, Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, and Claudia Masferrer, *Investing in the Neighborhood: [Changing Mexico-U.S. Migration Patterns and Opportunities for Sustainable Cooperation](#)* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2019).

[3] Muzaffar Chishti and Jessica Bolter, [Interlocking Set of Trump Administration Policies at the U.S-Mexico Border Bars Virtually All from Asylum](#), Migration Information Source, February 27, 2020.

[4] Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, [One year after the U.S.-Mexico Agreement: Reshaping Mexico’s Migration Policies](#), (Washington, DC: MPI, 2020).

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## About the Authors

**Andrew Selee** is President of the Migration Policy Institute (MPI). He also chairs MPI Europe's administrative council. Prior to joining MPI, he spent 17 years at the Woodrow Wilson Center, where he founded the Center's Mexico Institute and later served as Vice President for Programs and Executive Vice President. He has also worked as staff in the U.S. Congress and on development and migration programs in Tijuana, Mexico. He holds a PhD in policy studies from the University of Maryland, an MA in Latin American studies from the University of California, San Diego, and a BA, Phi Beta Kappa, from Washington University in St. Louis. He was selected as an Andrew Carnegie Fellow for the 2017-18 period.

**Andrea Tanco** serves as Strategic Advisor to the President and as Associate Policy Analyst at the Migration Policy Institute (MPI). In her role as Strategic Advisor, she supports President Andrew Selee on MPI's strategic positioning, institution building, development of new initiatives, leadership, and board management. As an Associate Policy Analyst, she provides qualitative and quantitative research support across programs. Prior to joining MPI, she worked with the Wilson Center's Mexico Institute and conducted research for Robin Wright, a joint fellow with the Wilson Center and the U.S. Institute of Peace. She holds a bachelor's degree in government and a secondary degree in international relations from Smith College.

**Ariel G. Ruiz Soto** is a Policy Analyst at the Migration Policy Institute, where he works with the U.S. Immigration Policy Program. He also manages MPI's internship program. His research focuses on the impact of U.S. immigration policies on immigrants and other populations, and the interaction between U.S., Mexican, and Central American migration policies. Mr. Ruiz Soto also analyzes methodological approaches to estimate sociodemographic trends of the unauthorized immigrant population in the United States. Mr. Ruiz Soto holds a master's degree from the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration with an emphasis on immigration policy and service provision, and a bachelor's degree in sociology from Whitman College.





contact us: [mexico@wilsoncenter.org](mailto:mexico@wilsoncenter.org)