

# **The U.S.-Mexico border is at a ‘breaking point’ as 76,000 migrants cross in a month. Here’s what you need to know**



Moises Castillo, Associated Press

Hundreds of Hondurans are blocked at the border crossing in Agua Caliente, Guatemala, Monday, Oct. 15, 2018. A caravan of Honduran migrants moved toward the country’s border with Guatemala in a desperate attempt to flee poverty and seek new lives in the United States.

SALT LAKE CITY — Over 76,000 undocumented immigrants crossed the U.S.-Mexico border in February, more than double the number that crossed during the same time period last year, according to data released by Customs and Border Protection on Tuesday.

“The system is well beyond capacity, and remains at the breaking point,” Kevin McAleenan, commissioner of Customs and Border Protection, told reporters at a press conference Tuesday.

The last time the month of February saw so many border crossings was in 2007. This month also had the highest total of border crossings of any month during President Donald Trump’s presidency, NBC News reported.

So far in fiscal year 2019 — which began in October — 237,327 migrants have been apprehended by U.S. officials along the border, a 97 percent increase from the previous year.

Let’s take a closer look at the data to understand who is crossing the southwest border and why, and how the U.S. is handling this surge in migration.

## **Who is crossing the border?**

More than 90 percent of recent migrants are from Guatemala, The New York Times reported. While in the past undocumented immigrants were primarily

single men from Mexico, the number of Mexicans crossing the border illegally has plummeted by over 300,000 in the last decade, the Deseret News previously reported.

At the same time, the number of undocumented immigrants from Central American countries — El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala — shot up by over 375,000 between 2007 and 2016, according to a 2018 Pew Research Center study.

“Central American families have become the new face of undocumented immigration,” Miriam Jordan wrote in The New York Times.

Indeed, 65 percent of the migrants who crossed the border in February were either children traveling alone or children with families.

The number of migrant families illegally entering the U.S. at the southwest border has increased dramatically over the last year. In the first five months of fiscal year 2019, U.S. officials detained 136,150 people traveling in families with children. This compares to 107,212 people traveling in families that were detained throughout all of fiscal year 2018, the Times reported.

## **Why are families crossing the border?**

Central American families are primarily traveling to the U.S. to escape danger and poverty in their home countries. According to the Times, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala have some of the highest homicide rates in the world, including widespread gang activity that can target civilians.

Traveling as a family unit can also make it easier to evade deportation or detention.



Delmer Martinez, Associated Press

U.S.-bound migrants walk past security forces who are stopping some vehicles carrying migrants to check their documents in Cofradia, Honduras, early Tuesday, Jan. 15, 2019. Yet another caravan of Central American migrants set out overnight from Honduras, seeking to reach the U.S. border following the same route followed by thousands on at least three caravans last year.

U.S. border officials told reporters that some of the strongest “pull factors” bringing families to cross the border have to do with federal laws that prevent the government from holding families in standard detention facilities for more than 72 hours. By law, officials are required to transfer families to a facility suitable for children or let them go free while their cases are pending, the Times reported.

Because Immigration and Customs Enforcement currently has only three residential family centers that can hold up to 3,326 parents and children combined, it has been forced to release thousands of migrants each week because there isn’t enough space to detain all of them — nor enough judges to hear all of their cases.

More than 40,000 family members crossed the border in February alone, according to government data.

## **Why the increase?**

In 2017, the number of migrants intercepted at the border was the smallest in decades, with 310,531 arrests, the Deseret News previously reported. The last time there were so few border arrests was in 1971.

The recent sudden increase in migrants may be partially due to President Trump’s goal to build a border wall between the U.S. and Mexico and his promise to crack down on illegal immigration.

“Previous spikes in border traffic have often preceded crackdowns. ... The announcement of a government spending deal to build a border wall on Feb. 15 may have precipitated a similar rush, as numbers had been steadily declining over December and January,” NBC News reported.

In addition, new policies instituted by the Trump administration have led to long waiting lines at legal points of entry at which migrants can claim asylum. This frustrated some migrants, resulting in more deciding to cross the border illegally.



Moises Castillo, Associated Press

Honduran migrants receive free water from Guatemalan police at the Honduran border crossing that connects with Agua Caliente, Guatemala, Monday, Oct. 15,

2018. Hundreds of Honduran migrants were eventually allowed to cross at the Guatemalan border under a broiling sun Monday hoping to make it to new lives in the United States, far from the poverty and violence of their home nation.

The problem has also been exacerbated by a dearth of immigration courts, judges and lawyers and an increasingly high volume of cases. As the Times reported, many migrants come to the U.S. to seek asylum, and the number of asylum cases has shot up in recent years. In 2008, around 5,000 migrants said they had a credible fear of persecution, which is the first legal step to request asylum. In 2018, that number rose to nearly 100,000.

The system, which already faces a backlog of over 700,000 cases, became even more pressurized when more than 40,000 immigration hearings were canceled during the government shutdown in January, pushing many immigrants' hearings back by years.

The Times reported that the number of migrant families crossing the U.S.-Mexico border is predicted to keep growing in upcoming months.

## **How to handle the migration surge?**

Officials and citizens along the border say they have been overwhelmed by the sudden influx in migrants.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement not only lacks adequate space for migrant families, it has also run out of detention space for single adults who cross the border illegally, according to the Times. As a result, it is releasing adults before their immigration court cases or asylum requests have been finalized.

More than 50,000 migrant adults are currently being detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement — the highest number ever, officials told the Times.

The lack of space for detainees has led volunteers, church leaders and other community members to find creative solutions. The Times and the Deseret News reported that churches, nursing homes and hotel rooms funded by donations have been hastily made available in towns along the border so that migrants to have a place to go.



Delmer Martinez, Associated Press

Migrants hoping to reach the U.S. wait in line to board a bus toward Honduras' border with Guatemala, as hundreds of migrants set off by bus or on foot from a main bus station in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, late Monday, Jan. 14, 2019. Yet another caravan of Central American migrants set out Monday from Honduras, seeking to reach the U.S. border following the same route followed by thousands on at least three caravans last year.

Customs and Border Protection is also increasing the medical care it makes available for migrants, after two children died in a detention facility in December 2018. Now all migrant children will receive comprehensive health screenings, and a new center will be set up in El Paso to provide improved shelter and medical care for families.

"These solutions are temporary and this situation is not sustainable," McAleenan said. "This is clearly both a border security and a humanitarian crisis."

McAleenan identified several ways for the involved parties to move forward, calling for Central American governments to improve economic security and opportunity in their countries and for the U.S. to cooperate with the Mexican government to invest in border security.

"We also face the acute need for legislative action to address the gaps in the legal framework" of immigration law, he said.

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