



## **Policy, faltering economy cited as border numbers plummet for 2020**

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Border Patrol agents intercept immigrants near Eagle Pass, Texas, in this photo from August 2019—the end of one of the busiest years for border apprehensions, with more than 977,000. Since then, apprehensions have fallen by half, a drop many experts attribute to impacts from COVID-19.

The number of migrants apprehended at the southern border fell sharply in fiscal 2020, a drop analysts attribute in large part to fears of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic havoc left in its wake.

Apprehensions through the first 11 months of the fiscal year are less than half the total for fiscal 2019. About 400,000 migrants had been apprehended through August, compared to 977,509 people caught the year before.

Experts said part of the slowdown is due to Trump administration policies, but much can be blamed on COVID-19 and the economic woes that followed, giving migrants “less of a reason to come here in the first place.”

“It being fairly pandemic-induced because of elevated fears and lack of economic opportunity in the places where they would have maybe sought out to go before,” said Sara Ritchie, director of communications at Kino Border Initiative.

Border crossings began to dip drastically in March, about the time that COVID-19 hit the United States and shutdowns started to be imposed. Migrants apprehended at the border fell from 34,442 in March to 17,086 in April—compared to 109,415 in April 2019.

Besides limiting travel within and between countries, the virus and the subsequent shutdowns of businesses drastically affected the economy of the U.S. and the job opportunities here in 2020 as opposed to last year.

“In 2020, you know, we have the COVID-19, we have the recession that resulted from COVID-19, so there’s this less of a reason to come here in the first place,” said Alex Nowrasteh, director of immigration studies at the Cato Institute.

Experts also note that 2019 saw an unusually high number of apprehensions at the border, the most in at least a dozen years.

“In 2019, there was a big surge of asylum-seekers coming across the border, especially around late spring and early summer, so that makes 2019 look like a bit of an outlier,” Nowrasteh said.

Analysts agree that at least part of the reduction is likely policy driven, pointing to programs like the Trump administration’s Migrant Protection Protocols that force immigrants to wait in Mexico for processing.

“So we saw an increase in the number of people being sent back to Mexico under that agreement, said Jessica Bolter, an associate policy analyst at the Migration Policy Institute. “We also saw Mexico step up their immigration enforcement efforts, kind of in response to U.S. pressure.”

The U.S., Mexican and Canadian governments also restricted legal border crossings in March to essential travel only, in another attempt to stem the spread of COVID-19.

Some experts who support the administration’s tough immigration policies said they expect the outcome of this fall’s presidential election could determine what direction the number of border apprehensions will take.

“We have an election coming up, and you know it depends who is going to be in office come January and what the policies of that administration might be,” said Ira Mehlman, the media director for the Federation for American Immigration Reform.

That was echoed by Lora Ries, a senior research fellow for homeland security at the Heritage Foundation, who said that if Trump is reelected to “a second term, then I think these agreements can continue.”