



Migrant encounters up 71% in March as Biden administration grapples with border

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The number of migrant encounters at the United States' southern border increased 71% since February, new numbers show, as the Biden administration grapples with how to handle the thousands of people, many of them unaccompanied children, seeking to enter the U.S. along the Mexico border.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection encountered more than 172,000 people trying to enter the U.S. along the southwest border in March – up from the 100,441 in February, according to Biden administration officials' analysis of the numbers, which were released Thursday.

The agency also encountered 18,890 unaccompanied children from Central America, double the number of children encountered in February; 9,297 unaccompanied or single minors were encountered in February.

An increasing number of migrants have been making their way to the border for months as the White House has struggled to house them and find them family or sponsors. Republican and Democratic lawmakers alike have called the situation at the border a “crisis” and criticized President Joe Biden's handling of it.

"Nobody should have the expectation this is going to be solved overnight," an administration official told reporters Wednesday when discussing the latest apprehension statistics.

In March, 103,900 people were expelled by the agency under Title 42, which allows Customs and Border Protection to expel undocumented migrants to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in holding facilities. Administration officials said that number represented 60% of total encounters for March, and 28% of the migrants were previously expelled under Title 42.

Under Title 42, migrants are expelled to Mexico but a portion attempt to cross back into the United States despite the policy and are again expelled.

Although many migrants are being turned away, the Biden administration has said it would accept children because it would be too dangerous to turn them away. Some families were being accepted into the United States because Mexico is not accepting some families with young children.

Administration officials said some families are being processed because some areas of Mexico, specifically the state of Tamaulipas that borders Texas, has limited capacity to take families with children under 6. In addition, an administration official said the agreement to expel migrants into Mexico covers only migrants coming from the Northern Triangle, including El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico, so migrants from other countries cannot be expelled into Mexico, although they can still be expelled under Title 42.

Because of the increased number of migrant children, Customs and Border Protection's jaillike facilities have become overcrowded. The Biden administration has opened new Department of Health and Human Services facilities to help move the children out of custody quickly while they vet family or sponsors, a process that could take weeks.

There were 17,345 families expelled under Title 42, the data said. But 35,559 family units were processed under Title 8, meaning they violated immigration law by entering the country between ports of entry but can make a credible fear claim to gain asylum.

Of the migrants who were apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border, only 4,136 came across through ports of entry, while 168,195 were apprehended by Border Patrol between the ports of entry.

Preliminary numbers of the apprehensions were first reported by [The Washington Post](#).

Biden has appointed Vice President Kamala Harris to work with Northern Triangle countries and Mexico to help stem migration coming from Central America.

HHS has opened several new temporary influx facilities over the past several weeks to help move children out of border patrol custody. Administration officials said there is now a 30-day average of 507 children being transferred out of border patrol custody as of the end of March, an increase from the previous average of 276.

Last month, in a news briefing, Biden attributed the increase of migrants as part of a cyclical rise of migrants who come to the United States in early spring. But this year's number of migrants coming to the United States is much higher than in 2019, when the country saw its last surge.

[According to border patrol statistics](#), 103,731 migrants were encountered in March 2019, almost 70,000 less than the number of migrants encountered by agency officials last month. In March 2020, that number was 34,460, a low number attributed to the pandemic.

Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said last month in a statement, "We are on pace to encounter more individuals on the southwest border than we have in the last 20 years."

"This is not new," Mayorkas said in his statement. "We have experienced migration surges before – in 2019, 2014, and before then as well."

Immigration analysts point to a variety of factors to account for the current swell of migrants coming to the southern border.

While many people traveling to the border are seeking economic opportunities, others are fleeing ongoing violence and environmental degradation, according to Douglas Massey, a professor of sociology at the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs.

Central Americans "account for about half [of the March numbers] of whom a third are adults and two-thirds are families and children. These people are fleeing deteriorating economic conditions and worsening security in the region," which has been ongoing since the Contra War, Massey notes.

"But now the deterioration in living conditions is exacerbated by the effects of climate change, which has unleashed more powerful and destructive hurricanes on the region and also spawned recurrent droughts that have imperiled coffee and other harvests throughout the region," he cautioned.

"There really are no ways for these people to enter the United States lawfully. So the only options they have are to enter illegally and then apply for asylum once they are here," Alex Nowrasteh, director of immigration studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, told USA TODAY.

According to Nowrasteh, policy changes like Title 42 also had the unintended effect of incentivizing further migration by lessening legal penalties for migrants crossing the border.

"So, in a way, Title 42 reduced the punishment for coming to the United States illegally, for single Mexican men especially," he contended.

While the Biden administration has taken measures to address the situation at the border, Nowrasteh argues that more can be done to process and reform the immigration system, even without legislation.

"I see their policies as basically a continuation of the bad immigration policies of the past thirty to forty years," he said. "They have not meaningfully liberalized immigration on the border at all. This is just a continuation of enforcement first, legalization and liberalization last."