

FAQ's: The Central American Refugee Crisis

Border Apprehensions by U.S. and Mexican Authorities in 2014 and 2015

In the summer of 2014, the number of children and families arriving at the U.S. southern border seeking humanitarian protection was significantly higher than the number seen in previous years. The vast majority of children and families came from the three Central American countries that make up the Northern Triangle: Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. On June 2, 2014, President Obama declared an “urgent humanitarian situation” and requested an emergency appropriation of \$3.7 billion. On July 10, 2014, Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Jeh Johnson stated that DHS would work in cooperation with other federal agencies and the governments of Mexico and Central America to “stem this tide” of migration.

While the U.S. and Mexico have experienced changing patterns in apprehensions, children and adults continue to flee unabating violence and persecution in the Northern Triangle countries. Encounters by U.S. authorities at the U.S. southern border correspond with changes in Mexican immigration enforcement policies.

How many children and families have arrived at the southern border in FY2015?

According to statistics regularly updated by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), during the ten-month period October 1, 2014 to July 31, 2015, border officials apprehended at the southwest U.S. border:

- 29,407 individuals traveling as a “family unit,¹” and
- 30,862 unaccompanied children.

How does this compare to the number of children and families who arrived in FY2014?

There has been a **53% drop** in apprehensions of families and a **51% drop** in apprehensions of unaccompanied children as compared to the same time period during fiscal year 2014. During the first ten months of fiscal year 2014, border officials apprehended:

- 62,848 individuals traveling in “family units,” and
- 62,977 unaccompanied children.

However, news reports indicate a recent increase of children arriving unaccompanied or with a family member during the month of August. In August, 6,158 individuals traveling as a “family unit” and 4,632 unaccompanied children were apprehended, reflecting a 52 percent increase over the number of apprehensions during the month of August last year.

Has Mexico played a role in preventing migration of children and families to the United States?

Yes. Apprehensions and deportations of Central Americans by the Mexican government have increased significantly since the July 2014 announcement of Mexico’s Southern Border Plan, which the Mexican government states is an initiative designed to bring more order to migration

¹ CBP defines “family units” as those individuals traveling with a child under the age of 18 that include a parent or legal guardian of the child.

controls in Mexico while respecting human rights. In fiscal year 2015, more Central Americans will be apprehended by Mexican authorities than by U.S. authorities. In addition, the Mexican government will deport a record number of individuals, including children and families, back to the Northern Triangle.²

- In FY2014, Mexico apprehended 102,000 individuals from the three Northern Triangle
- In FY2015, researchers project that Mexico will apprehend 173,000 individuals from the three Northern Triangle countries, marking a **70% increase in apprehensions**
- In FY2015, Mexico will deport 156,000 people to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, an approximate **100% increase in deportations**
- Apprehensions of children from the Northern Triangle in Mexico grew from:
 - 8,000 in FY2013 to
 - 20,000 in FY2014, to
 - A projected 29,000 in FY2015
- In FY2015, Mexico will deport 12,000 unaccompanied children, marking a **50% increase in child deportations** over FY2014

While U.S. authorities have applauded Mexico's increased enforcement efforts, human rights and academic organizations have expressed concerns that Mexico does not have adequate protection systems in place to receive and process requests for asylum. On June 8, 2015, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concerns over Mexico's detention of migrant children; reports of abuse, killings, exploitation, and violence against migrant children; and reports that children are deported without a process to determine their best interests. On June 10, 2015, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights expressed concern over stepped-up immigration enforcement actions generally taken against migrants in Mexico pursuant to the Southern Border Plan and reiterated its previous recommendation that Mexico implement alternatives to detention.

*On July 15, the Mexican Senate requested that Mexican immigration authorities immediately suspend detentions and repatriations of child migrants—including unaccompanied children and children traveling with adult family members—and instead comply with an administrative process that is based on the principle of the best interests of the child. The best interests of the child is the cornerstone principle in international children's human rights law and U.S. domestic child welfare law.

Has the refugee crisis in the region improved?

No. Violence and persecution in the Northern Triangle—particularly against children—is an ongoing humanitarian disaster. El Salvador now ranks as the homicide capital of the world, with half of murders committed against children. Guatemala has the second highest child murder rate. In June 2015, UNICEF reported an *increase* in the number of Honduran children leaving the country due to violence. Other experts, responding to statements by the First Lady of Honduras celebrating the decrease in deportations of children from the United States and implying an improvement to the refugee crisis, remarked that lower numbers of deportations from the United States came with higher numbers of deportations from Mexico. In sum, while regional migration enforcement policies and patterns have evolved and changed over the past year, the exodus of Central American children fleeing violence and persecution appears to remain unchanged.

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² While the U.S. apprehended 239,000 individuals from the three Northern Triangle countries in FY2014, more than double the 102,000 apprehended by Mexico that year, researchers project those numbers will reverse in FY2015 to 110,000 apprehensions in the U.S., with Mexican apprehensions increasing to 173,000. Mexico is also deporting children, families, and individuals from the Northern Triangle at higher rates. In FY2015, it is predicted that Mexico will deport 156,000 people to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. In previous years, Mexico deported about half that number.