

METERING & COVID-19

APRIL 2020



STEPHANIE LEUTERT, SAVITRI ARVEY, ELLIE EZZELL, & MARIANNE RICHARDSON

INTRODUCTION

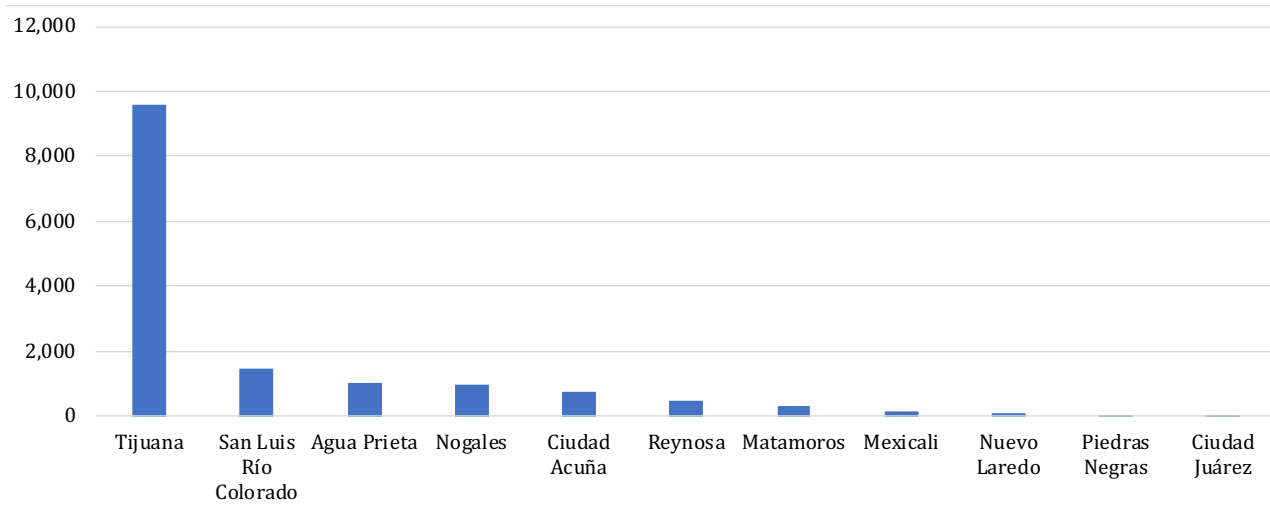
For the past two years, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has been stationed at the United States' international boundary with Mexico and informed arriving asylum seekers that U.S. ports of entry were full. Simultaneously, CBP officials accepted limited numbers of asylum seekers a day, in a process that is known as metering. As lines of asylum seekers grew longer in border cities, Mexican authorities and civil society groups responded by providing humanitarian assistance and creating informal waitlists.

Over the past two weeks, CBP has stopped processing asylum seekers at ports of entry, due to the spread of COVID-19. On March 20, 2020, [CBP announced that it would only be processing individuals for essential travel](#) at U.S. ports of entry, and did not include processing asylum seekers in its list of essential travel activities. CBP's announcement noted that the changes would remain in place through April 20, 2020, but this date may be extended depending on the evolution of the COVID-19 crisis.

This report by the Robert Strauss Center at The University of Texas at Austin and the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies (USMEX) at the University of California San Diego aims to provide an update on how metering's suspension has affected asylum seekers and metering lists along the border. It also looks at how migrant shelters are preparing for COVID-19 cases among asylum seekers.

By early April 2020, there were 14,850 asylum seekers on waitlists in 11 Mexican border cities. This is only a slight decrease from February 2020, when there were an estimated 15,000 asylum seekers on waitlists. The majority of these asylum seekers are located in Tijuana, which, as of March 15, 2020, had 9,600 people registered on the list. However, it is not clear if all of these asylum seekers remain in the corresponding Mexican border cities. In multiple cities, list managers reported that individuals have attempted to cross in between ports of entry, traveled to other border cities, or, particularly for Mexican asylum seekers, traveled back to their communities of origin.

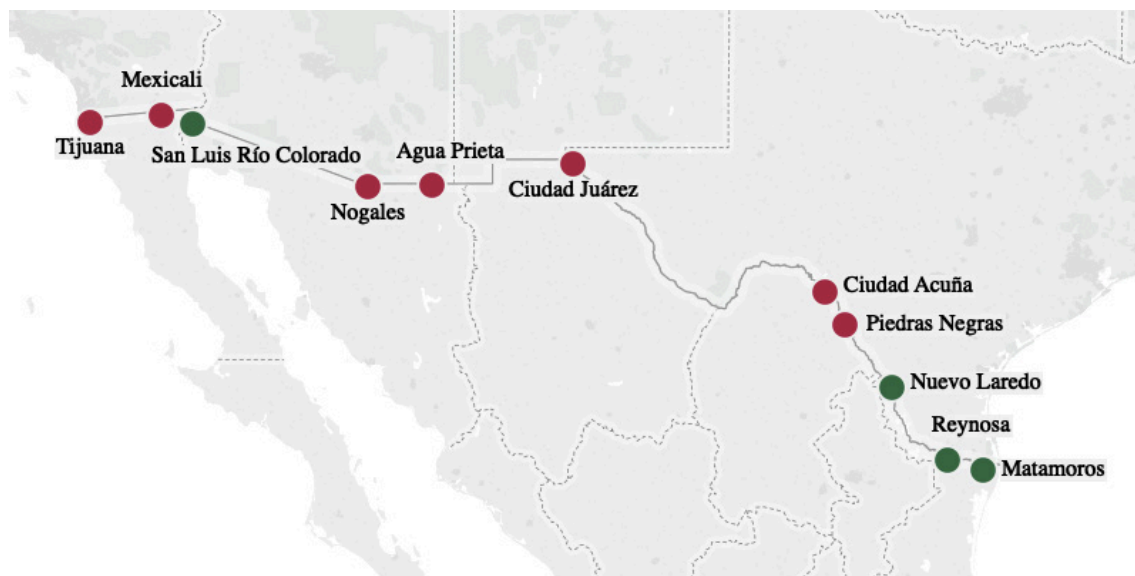
Figure 1: Number of People on Asylum Waitlists (April 2020)



Data collected from April 1, 2020 to April 6, 2020.

Since March 20, 2020, most asylum waitlists have stopped allowing new entrants. With the exception of San Luis Río Colorado, Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros, all other asylum waitlists are now closed. This means that asylum seekers arriving in many Mexican border cities cannot get on waitlists and must wait until the lists reopen. Figure 2 shows the status of asylum waitlists by Mexican border city. Green circles indicate cities where asylum waitlists are still open and red circles indicate cities where asylum waitlists are now closed.

Figure 2: Mexican Border Cities By List Status



Data collected from April 1, 2020 to April 6, 2020.

The COVID-19 crisis has also affected asylum seekers' living conditions in Mexican border cities. Various migrant shelters have shut down or limited their number of guests due to social distancing guidelines. Many migrants who worked in restaurants, factories, or construction industries have lost their jobs and are now unable to pay for housing or basic goods.¹ The combined result has been higher rates of homelessness and asylum seekers spending more time in public spaces. However, because of shelter-in-place orders, local law enforcement in certain cities—such as Nogales and Mexicali—have started patrolling public areas more heavily and telling asylum seekers that they cannot be in these zones.

This update was compiled using a different methodology from past metering updates. In line with social distancing and shelter-in-place advisories, the April 2020 metering update was put together without any field visits. Instead, it draws on phone and WhatsApp interviews with asylum seekers and government officials in Mexican border cities, and representatives from civil society organizations on both sides of the border. It also relies on local news articles to fill in any gaps.

Metering & Asylum Waitlists: April 2020

Port of Entry <i>List Administrator</i>	Waitlist Status	# of Asylum Seekers on List <i>Date Recorded</i>	Recent Changes
<p>Matamoros, Tamaulipas</p> <p><i>National Migration Institute (Instituto Nacional de Migración, INM) and the Casa del Migrante: Non-Mexican list at the Gateway Bridge</i></p> <p><i>Asylum Seekers: Mexican lists at the Gateway Bridge</i></p>	Open ²	<p>300 people</p> <p><i>April 6, 2020</i></p>	<p>Hundreds of Mexican asylum seekers continue to wait within the Matamoros tent camp. These asylum seekers are primarily from the Mexican states of Chiapas, Guerrero, and Oaxaca. Since CBP stopped processing asylum seekers, no new Mexican asylum seekers have arrived at the camp.</p> <p>The Mexican government is offering free buses to take Mexican asylum seekers back to southern states. On March 30, 2020, around 100 Mexican asylum seekers left the camp on these buses.³ Other asylum seekers in the camp noted that it was unclear if these individuals had abandoned their place on the list or if they will return to the camp once CBP begins to process individuals again. The list managers are freezing the list, so if these individuals do return to the camp, they will be able to retake their place in line.</p> <p>Within the camp, the organization Global Response Management (GRM) is providing medical care and is building a 20-person field hospital.⁴ Along with the Resource Center in Matamoros, GRM has also added more hand washing stations.⁵</p> <p>In Matamoros migrant shelters, staff are trained to detect a COVID-19 case and to isolate the individual from other migrants.⁶</p>

Metering & Asylum Waitlists: April 2020 (continued)

Port of Entry <i>List Administrator</i>	Waitlist Status	# of Asylum Seekers on List <i>Date Recorded</i>	Recent Changes
Reynosa, Tamaulipas <i>Senda de Vida migrant shelter</i>	Open	480 people <i>April 3, 2020</i>	<p>On March 20, 2020, there were approximately 1,500 asylum seekers waiting in Reynosa. Since then, the number of asylum seekers has dropped, as some people traveled to other parts of Mexico, returned to their countries of origin, or attempted to cross between ports of entry.</p> <p>There are now 480 asylum seekers on the waitlist. The list remains open, and the shelter reports that individuals are still arriving and signing up. Asylum seekers on the list are mostly from Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, Haiti, and sub saharan Africa (such as Cameroon and Angola).</p> <p>More than two weeks ago, the shelter began implementing a COVID-19 quarantine, and only allows entry or exit for emergencies or gathering supplies. Due to the quarantine, asylum seekers who arrive in Reynosa and sign up on the list are not allowed to enter or stay at the Senda de Vida shelter.</p> <p>The Senda de Vida shelter currently hosts 220 individuals. The shelter reports that they are running low on essentials, especially diapers and milk. The other asylum seekers on the list are staying in hotels and rented rooms across the city.</p> <p>Doctors Without Borders provides medical support to the shelter. Members of the organization visit the shelter multiple times a week to check asylum seekers for COVID-19 symptoms.⁷</p>

Metering & Asylum Waitlists: April 2020 (continued)

Port of Entry <i>List Administrator</i>	Waitlist Status	# of Asylum Seekers on List <i>Date Recorded</i>	Recent Changes
Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas <i>Network of six migrant shelters managing six separate lists (one per shelter)</i>	Open	~100 people <i>April 3, 2020</i>	<p>During the past few weeks, the number of asylum seekers in Nuevo Laredo has decreased.⁸ The approximately 100 asylum seekers on the various shelters' asylum waitlists come from Mexico, sub-saharan Africa, and Central America.</p> <p>Nuevo Laredo shelters are also taking precautions to protect against COVID-19. Casa Nazareth, one of the most established shelters in the city, has a doctor who checks arriving individuals. They ask asylum seekers to follow sanitary practices, such as washing their hands and not greeting one another with handshakes. Casa Nazareth has set up an isolated section of the shelter in case anyone shows any symptoms.⁹</p>
Piedras Negras, Coahuila <i>Municipal government</i>	Closed	12 people <i>April 2, 2020</i>	<p>Since February 2020, the number of asylum seekers on the Piedras Negras waitlist has decreased. Currently there are only 12 people on the waitlist, and these individuals are from Mexico (5), Brazil (4), and Honduras (3). The waitlist closed on March 20, 2020.</p> <p>On April 3, 2020, the largest shelter in Piedras Negras, Frontera Digna, stopped accepting new arrivals due to COVID-19. Frontera Digna received a shipment of personal cleaning supplies from the Red Cross. Other small shelters in the city have also shut down.</p>

Metering & Asylum Waitlists: April 2020 (continued)

Port of Entry <i>List Administrator</i>	Waitlist Status	# of Asylum Seekers on List <i>Date Recorded</i>	Recent Changes
Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila <i>Civil Protection (Protección Civil): individuals & families</i>	Closed	300 people (families and individuals) <i>April 6, 2020</i>	In late March 2020, there were approximately 600 asylum seekers in Ciudad Acuña, with 250 people staying in the municipal shelters. ¹⁰ These individuals came from Cuba, Venezuela, Africa, Haiti, Mexico, and Central America. Since then, the number of asylum seekers has decreased. There are currently 300 people on the waitlist.
Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua <i>State Population Council (Consejo Estatad de Población, COESPO)</i>	Closed	5 to 10 people <i>April 3, 2020</i>	On March 20, 2020, COESPO closed the asylum waitlist. At the time there were only 5 to 10 individuals on the list. The Casa del Migrante has taken precautions for COVID-19. They have asked INM for personal protective equipment and medical exams for migrants arriving to the city. The Casa del Migrante has also asked the public for donations of hand sanitizer, masks, gloves, cleaning supplies, and nonperishable food. They report that they are unable to buy these supplies at local stores. ¹¹

Metering & Asylum Waitlists: April 2020 (continued)

Port of Entry <i>List Administrator</i>	Waitlist Status	# of Asylum Seekers on List <i>Date Recorded</i>	Recent Changes
Agua Prieta, Sonora <i>CAME migrant shelter</i>	Closed	1,000+ people <i>April 3, 2020</i>	<p>On March 27, 2020, the CAME shelter closed its asylum waitlist. At that time, shelter staff told asylum seekers to tell their friends and family that they shouldn't travel to the border.</p> <p>The CAME migrant shelter is currently hosting 33 individuals who arrived during the first three weeks of March, but they have stopped accepting new guests.</p> <p>The majority of the asylum seekers on the shelter's asylum waitlist are Mexican and many are not physically present in Agua Prieta. This is because the CAME shelter allows asylum seekers to register for the waitlist via WhatsApp.</p>
Nogales, Sonora <i>Municipal government</i>	Closed	990 people <i>April 6, 2020</i>	<p>Around March 16, 2020, the Nogales municipal government stopped registering new individuals. They have said that they won't take any new names until at least September 2020.</p> <p>There are currently 990 people on the Nogales waitlist, including 275 minors. The majority of the asylum seekers come from Mexico (Guerrero, Michoacán, and Oaxaca, among other states), followed by Cuba and Venezuela.</p> <p>The Nogales shelters have not limited the number of arrivals. Instead, the San Juan Bosco migrant shelter has said that they are escalating sanitation practices but have not received any guidance on what to do with guests.¹² They do not have medical personnel.</p>

Metering & Asylum Waitlists: April 2020 (continued)

Port of Entry <i>List Administrator</i>	Waitlist Status	# of Asylum Seekers on List <i>Date Recorded</i>	Recent Changes
San Luis Río Colorado, Sonora <i>Casa del Migrante La Divina Providencia</i>	Open	1,459 people <i>April 6, 2020</i>	<p>La Divina Providencia migrant shelter is still accepting new arrivals and allowing people to join the waitlist. However, since March 20, 2020, they have only registered several Cuban asylum seekers. Roughly 83 percent of asylum seekers on the list are Mexican, 11 percent are Cuban, and the rest are from Central America or other countries.</p> <p>The shelter has increased their sanitation practices and checks all migrants and staff for COVID-19 symptoms. In particular, they check everyone in the shelter for fevers, multiple times per day.</p>
Mexicali, Baja California <i>Grupo Beta</i>	Closed	~150 people ¹³ <i>April 2, 2020</i>	<p>After CBP stopped processing asylum seekers, Grupo Beta closed the asylum waitlist in Mexicali.</p> <p>The Baja California Secretary of Health is monitoring migrant populations in the state for COVID-19. They report that as of early April 2020, there had not been any cases of migrants with COVID-19.¹⁴ Alfa & Omega, one of the largest shelters in Mexicali, is no longer accepting new arrivals.¹⁵</p>

Metering & Asylum Waitlists: April 2020 (continued)

Port of Entry <i>List Administrator</i>	Waitlist Status	# of Asylum Seekers on List <i>Date Recorded</i>	Recent Changes
Tijuana, Baja California¹⁶ <i>Grupo Beta / Support from asylum seekers</i>	Closed	9,600 people ¹⁷ <i>March 15, 2020</i>	<p>After CBP stopped receiving asylum seekers, the Tijuana waitlist managers continued to register new asylum seekers for several days and then put the list on pause. Chaparral / PedWest—the port of entry where asylum seekers sign up for the waitlist—is now closed to all pedestrian traffic.</p> <p>Tijuana’s shelters are in quarantine and are generally not accepting new arrivals.¹⁸ Casa del Migrante accepts some people who come daily for food, but is not accepting new arrivals. The Agape Migrant Shelter is planning on staying open, but, as of March 26, 2020, the director had isolated 35 migrants in a different room because they were sick.¹⁹</p> <p>The Coalition for the Defense of Migrants asked Baja California authorities to expand testing and open access to Tijuana’s federal shelter, Centro Integrador Carmen Serdán, which has a capacity for 3,000 people and provides medical services.²⁰ The shelter has since started receiving more migrants. Baja California authorities are exploring the possibility of converting this federal migrant shelter into a COVID-19 hospital in Tijuana.²¹</p>

**The numbers shift every day and should be interpreted as a general range rather than an exact figure.*

ENDNOTES

- 1 Mariela Tapia, “Protestan trabajadores de maquiladoras no esenciales,” La Voz de la Frontera, April 6, 2020. <https://www.lavozdelafrontera.com.mx/local/protestan-trabajadores-de-maquiladoras-no-esenciales-5066385.html>
- 2 Special thanks to B. Gómez for collecting information on the asylum waitlist in Matamoros.
- 3 Julia Le Duc, “[Por condiciones precarias, regresan a sus comunidades migrantes indígenas que solicitaban asilo en EU](#),” La Jornada, March 31, 2020, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2020/03/31/politica/012n1pol>.
- 4 Acacia Coronado, “In Migrants Camps Along the Texas-Mexico Border, Close Quarters and Closing Borders Raise Concerns,” Texas Observer, March 27, 2020, <https://www.texasobserver.org/covid-19-border-texas-mexico/>.
- 5 GRM also requested COVID-19 public education resources in indigenous languages to ensure that all asylum seekers have the appropriate information.
- 6 Perla Resendez, “Realizan 50 pruebas a migrantes,” Expreso Press, March 30, 2020, <https://expreso.press/2020/03/30/realizan-50-pruebas-a-migrantes-todas-han-resultado-negativas/>.
- 7 “Mantienen cerco sanitario con migrantes en Reynosa,” Vox Populi Noticias, March 29, 2020, <https://voxpathulinoticias.com.mx/2020/03/mantienen-cerco-sanitario-con-migrantes-en-reynosa/>.
- 8 Abdiel Perez Ibarra, “Migrantes mexicanos desisten del sueño americano por cierre de frontera,” RN Noticias, March 25, 2020, <http://www.rnnoticias.com.mx/nuevo-laredo/migrantes-mexicanos-desisten-del-sueno-americano-por-cierre-de-frontera>.
- 9 Nora Zapata, “Extremen medidas preventivas en casa del migrante ‘Nazareth’,” Primera Hora, March 30 2020, <http://www.primerahora.com.mx/index.php?n=244630>.
- 10 Alma Proa, “Continúan llegando migrantes en contingencia por Covid-10,” Zócalo, March 29, 2020, https://www.zocalo.com.mx/new_site/articulo/continuan-llegando-migrantes-en-contingencia-por-covid-19.
- 11 Herika Martinez Prado, “Solicitan alimentos y gel antibacterial para migrantes,” El Diario, April 2, 2020, <https://diario.mx/juarez/solicitan-alimentos-y-gel-antibacterial-para-migrantes-20200402-1647620.html>.
- 12 “Solicita Albergue ayuda por el Covid-19,” Nuevo Día Nogales, March 18, 2020, https://www.nuevodia.mx/nuevodianogales/vernoticias.php?artid=7326&cat=61#_XoZD2ZNKgII.
- 13 This estimate is based on an interview with a shelter director and could be a slight undercount.
- 14 Nicolle de León, “Mexicalenses no entienden gravedad de pandemia: Bonilla,” El Imparcial, April 5, 2020, <https://www.elimparcial.com/mexicali/mexicali/Mexicalenses-no-entienden-gravedad-de-pandemia-Bonilla-20200405-0009.html>.
- 15 Nicolle de León, “Albergues paran ayuda a migrantes por COVID-19,” El Imparcial, March 28, 2020, <https://www.elimparcial.com/mexicali/mexicali/Albergues-paran-ayuda-a-migrantes-por-Covid-19-20200328-0001.html>.
- 16 The data provided for the asylum waitlist in Tijuana was collected by a team of Al Otro Lado volunteers during daily visits to the Chaparral port of entry.
- 17 This was the last day that data was collected for the waitlist. However, the list remained open for another week. It is possible that another 100 or 200 individuals joined the list after March 15, 2020.
- 18 On March 20, 2020, Tijuana’s main 15 shelters were at 75 percent capacity, with 811 Mexicans, 264 Central Americans, and 199 individuals of other nationalities.
- 19 Wendy Fry, “Tijuana’s oldest migrant shelter closes to new arrivals to protect against coronavirus,” The San Diego Union-Tribune, March 26, 2020, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/border-baja-california/story/2020-03-26/casa-del-migrante-migrant-shelter-closes-for-first-time-to-protect-current-residents-from-coronavirus>.
- 20 Wendy Fry, “Tijuana’s oldest migrant shelter closes to new arrivals to protect against coronavirus,” The San Diego Union-Tribune, March 26, 2020, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/border-baja-california/story/2020-03-26/casa-del-migrante-migrant-shelter-closes-for-first-time-to-protect-current-residents-from-coronavirus>.
- 21 “No hay toque de queda, hay toque de conciencia,” El Imparcial, April 2, 2020, <https://www.elimparcial.com/tijuana/tijuana/No-hay-toque-de-queda-hay-toque-de-conciencia-Gobernador-20200401-0042.html>.