

METERING UPDATE

MAY 2020



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INTRODUCTION

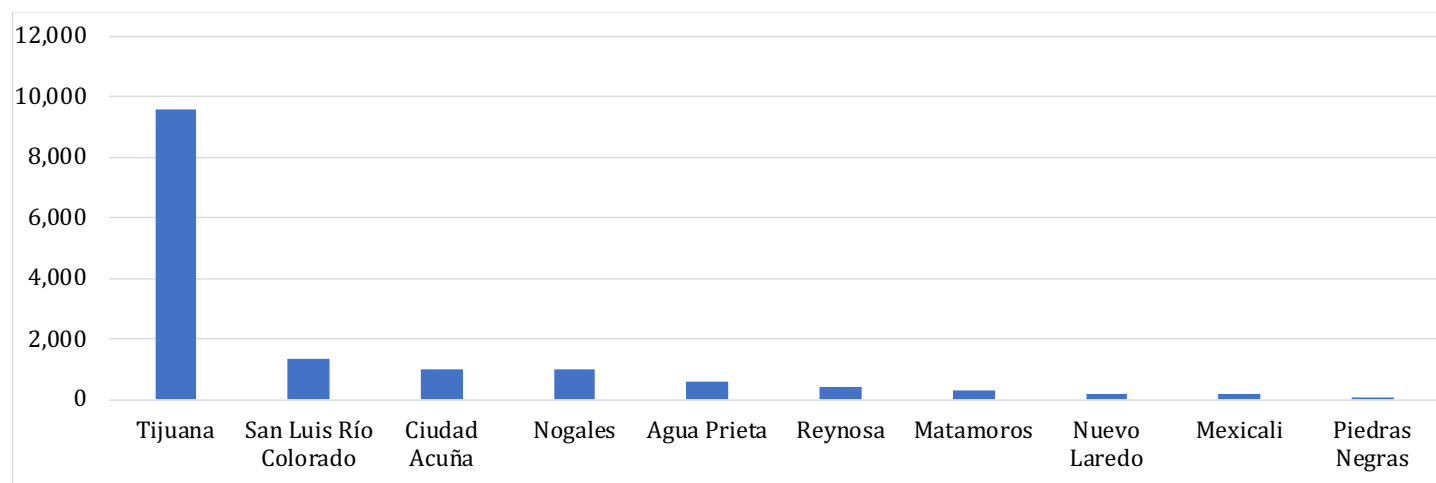
Since April 2018, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials have been stationed at the United States' international boundary with Mexico and have informed arriving asylum seekers that U.S. ports of entry are full. Simultaneously, CBP officials also began accepting limited numbers of asylum seekers each 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.

On March 20, 2020, CBP stopped processing asylum seekers at ports of entry, due to the spread of COVID-19. At this time, 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. This announcement has been repeatedly extended, with the current update noting that CBP's changes would [remain in place until June 22, 2020](#).

This report by the Robert S. 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 provides an update on metering along the U.S.-Mexico border amid CBP's suspension. It covers how the shutdown has affected metering lists and asylum seekers along the border, and how migrant shelters have responded to the spread of COVID-19.

In late May 2020, there were 14,580 asylum seekers on waitlists in 11 Mexican border cities. This is a slight decrease from April 2020, when there were 14,850 people.¹ Some cities reported increases in their numbers, such as Ciudad Acuña, and other cities reported decreases, including Reynosa and San Luis Río Colorado. The majority of the asylum seekers are located in Tijuana, which still had 9,600 people registered as of May 21, 2020. However, these numbers only reflect the number of asylum seekers on waitlists and do not represent the total number of people waiting in Mexican border cities.

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

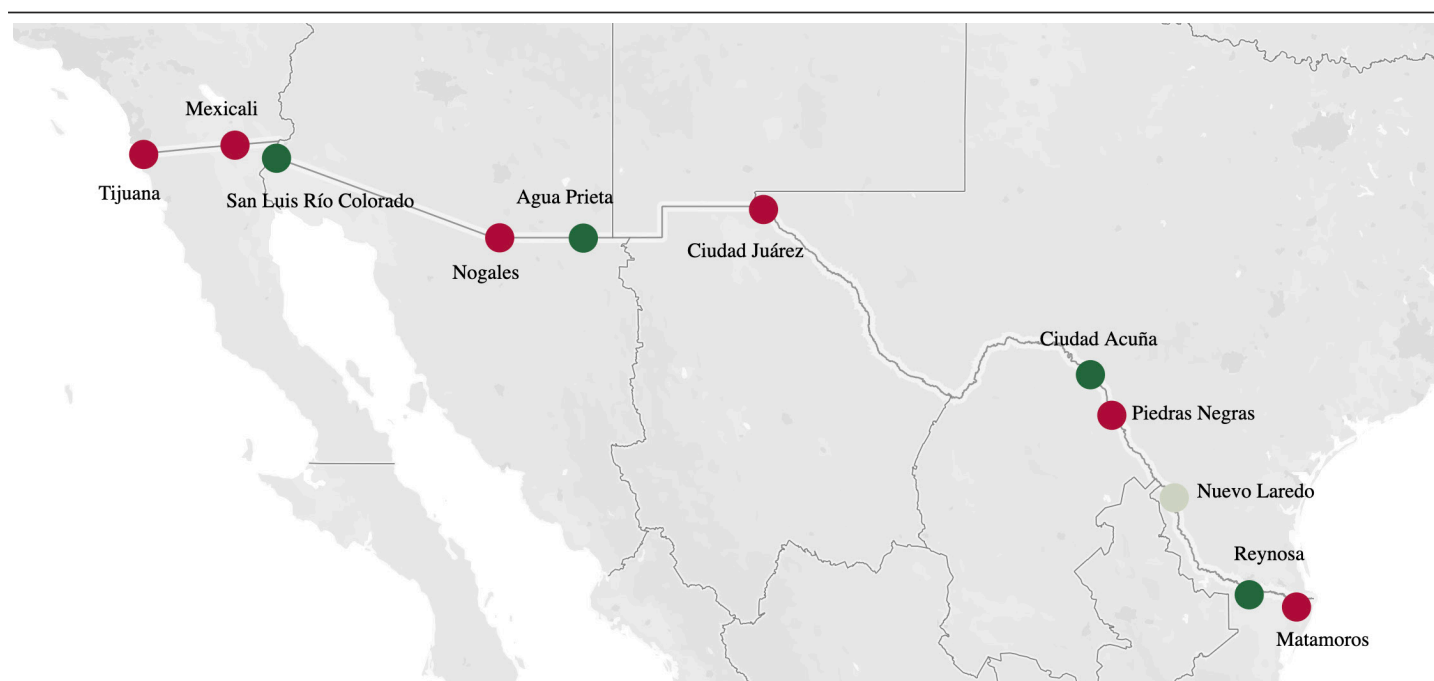


Authors' elaboration. Data collected from May 21, 2020 to May 27, 2020.

There are reasons to believe that the actual number of asylum seekers waiting at the U.S.-Mexico border is lower than this total. In late March 2020, many asylum waitlists closed to new entrants, and the number of asylum seekers on these lists has remained frozen ever since. At the same time, list managers in multiple cities reported that some individuals, particularly Mexican asylum seekers, traveled back to their communities of origin during the pandemic. These individuals are often still listed on waitlists but are no longer residing in border cities.

Overall, the majority of asylum waitlists remain closed along the border. Only the waitlists in Reynosa, Nuevo Laredo, Ciudad Acuña, Agua Prieta, and San Luis Río Colorado are currently open. Figure 2 shows the status of asylum waitlists by Mexican border city. Green circles indicate cities where asylum waitlists are open, red circles indicate cities where asylum waitlists are closed, and the grey circle for Nuevo Laredo indicates that some of the city's lists are open and others are closed.

Figure 2: Mexican Border Cities By List Status (May 2020)



Data collected from May 21, 2020 to May 27, 2020.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, asylum seekers face heightened challenges to even reach the U.S.-Mexico border. Guatemala and Mexico have tightened control over their borders, and Mexico's National Migration Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Migración*, INM) continues to operate migration checkpoints with the National Guard's (*Guardia Nacional*) support.² Many migrant shelters throughout Mexico's interior have also closed their doors to individuals traveling north.

Asylum seekers in Mexican border cities have also faced additional challenges. Asylum seekers have struggled to pay for housing or food, as their jobs in restaurants, factories, and construction have disappeared amid stay-at-home orders. While some organizations have increased direct support to these individuals, including cash assistance, it hasn't been sufficient to meet the demand. Additionally, most shelters remain closed and there are

fewer volunteers and donations amid the health crisis. Mexico's federal government has also declined to provide support to migrant shelters or civil society organizations.³

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, asylum seekers at the border have been unable to make any asylum claims in the United States, both at and between ports of entry. Prior to May 20, 2020, asylum seekers often chose to cross between ports of entry, turn themselves in to Border Patrol, and begin the process of seeking asylum. Yet, a March 24, 2020 Center for Disease Control (CDC) order currently allows Border Patrol agents to immediately expel all apprehended individuals, including asylum seekers, to the nearest Mexican city or to their home countries. On May 19, 2020, the CDC order was extended indefinitely.

In line with social distancing and shelter-in-place advisories, this May 2020 metering update was put together without any field visits. Instead, it draws on phone and WhatsApp interviews with asylum seekers, government officials, and civil society organizations on both sides of the border. It also relies on local news articles to fill in any gaps.

Metering & Asylum Waitlists: May 2020

Port of Entry <i>List Administrator</i>	Waitlist Status	# of Asylum Seekers on List <i>Date Recorded</i>	Recent Changes
Matamoros, Tamaulipas <i>National Migration Institute (Instituto Nacional de Migración, INM) and the Casa del Migrante: Non-Mexican list at the Gateway Bridge</i> <i>Asylum Seekers: Mexican lists at the Gateway Bridge</i>	Closed ⁴	300 people (80 families) May 26, 2020	<p>A group of Mexican asylum seekers continues to wait in 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 to the camp.</p> <p>The list managers have frozen the waitlist and have not removed anyone, regardless of whether or not the person is physically present in the camp. This is important, since some Mexican asylum seekers have returned to their communities or have rented hotel rooms and apartments in Matamoros to wait out the pandemic. However, once CBP begins asylum processing again, some of these asylum seekers plan to return to the camp and retake their place on the list.</p> <p>Within the Matamoros tent encampment, the organization Global Response Management has built a field hospital to provide medical care to waiting asylum seekers. As of May 26, 2020, no one in the camp has tested positive for COVID-19.⁵</p>
Reynosa, Tamaulipas <i>Senda de Vida migrant shelter</i>	Open	390 people May 27, 2020	<p>The Senda de Vida shelter runs the asylum waitlist system in Reynosa. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, new arrivals are not allowed to stay at the shelter, which has been under quarantine since March. Instead, shelter staff encourage arriving asylum seekers to find shelter in the interior of the state, due to safety concerns.</p> <p>Currently, the shelter is maintaining two lists. The first list is for people who signed up before the shelter's quarantine began and are staying at the shelter. As of May 27, 2020, this list had 190 individuals. The second list consists of people who signed up after the quarantine began and therefore had to stay in a different location. As of May 27, 2020, this list had 200 individuals.</p>

Metering & Asylum Waitlists: May 2020 (continued)

Port of Entry <i>List Administrator</i>	Waitlist Status	# of Asylum Seekers on List <i>Date Recorded</i>	Recent Changes
Reynosa, Tamaulipas (continued)			<p>Senda de Vida reports that while new asylum seekers continue to arrive in the city, the waitlists' numbers have gone down since April. This is because some people are choosing to return to their home communities or travel to other parts of the border. The shelter only removes someone from the waitlists if that person specifically requests to be removed.</p> <p>Currently, about 40 percent of asylum seekers are from African countries, 20 percent are from Haiti, 15 percent are from Mexico, 10 percent are from Honduras, 10 percent from Nicaragua, and 5 percent are from Guatemala.</p> <p>The shelter relies on donations for meals and essential items and has been experiencing shortages during the quarantine. In particular, they need items for children and infants. Doctors Without Borders visits the shelter twice a week, and a doctor from the Mexican Secretary of Health visited in May.</p>
Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas <i>Network of six migrant shelters managing six separate lists (one per shelter)</i>	Open / Closed	~150 people May 26, 2020	<p>A network of six migrant shelters manages the waitlists in Nuevo Laredo. The lists continue to be open or closed depending on the shelter. List managers report that asylum seekers on the lists have been waiting for four months.</p> <p>On April 20, 2020, Tamaulipas' Health Secretary announced that 15 migrants tested positive for COVID-19 at the Casa Nazareth migrant shelter. As of May 6, 2020, all of the individuals had recovered.⁶</p>

Metering & Asylum Waitlists: May 2020 (continued)

Port of Entry <i>List Administrator</i>	Waitlist Status	# of Asylum Seekers on List <i>Date Recorded</i>	Recent Changes
Piedras Negras, Coahuila <i>Municipal government</i>	Closed	12 people <i>May 22, 2020</i>	<p>The asylum waitlist remains closed in Piedras Negras. The number on the list has not changed since March 2020.</p> <p>On April 3, 2020, the city's shelters closed, and on May 20, 2020, the municipal government announced that shelters would remain closed.⁷</p> <p>Shelters and churches have provided groceries and cash-assistance to migrants who are living outside of shelters.</p>
Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila <i>Civil Protection (Protección Civil): individuals & families</i>	Open	~1,000 people (368 adults and 208 families) <i>May 27, 2020</i>	<p>There are close to 1,000 asylum seekers in Ciudad Acuña. Asylum seekers continue to arrive almost every day to sign up on Civil Protection's waitlists for single adults and families.</p> <p>The majority of the asylum seekers come from Cuba, El Salvador, Honduras, and Venezuela.</p>
Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua <i>State Population Council (Consejo Estatad de Población, COESPO)</i>	Closed	0 <i>May 22, 2020</i>	<p>COESPO's metering list remains closed.</p> <p>COESPO and other partners operate the Espiritu Santo "filter" shelter. This shelter accepts individuals who are new arrivals to the city, those who have been expelled or deported from the United States, and others who need accommodations. The shelter has spaces for individuals who want to stay for a night or two and those who want to quarantine for 14 days before being released to the city's shelters for a longer term stay. As of May 22, 2020, there haven't been any confirmed COVID-19 cases in the filter shelter.</p> <p>The federal shelter Centro Integral para el Migrante Leona Vicario has had several confirmed COVID-19 cases.</p>

Metering & Asylum Waitlists: May 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>	Open	600 people <i>May 21, 2020</i>	The asylum waitlist has reopened to new entrants, who can sign up by phone. The majority of asylum seekers on the list are from the Mexican state of Guerrero. The shelters in Agua Prieta remain closed to new entrants.
Nogales, Sonora <i>Municipal government</i>	Closed	990 people <i>May 20, 2020</i>	The asylum waitlist remains closed in Nogales. New migrants have stopped showing up in large numbers in the city and the ones who do arrive leave after several days. The city's shelters canceled plans to expand their capacity. ⁸
San Luis Río Colorado, Sonora <i>Casa del Migrante La Divina Providencia</i>	Open	1,366 people <i>May 14, 2020</i>	The list remains open. Migrants can sign up by phone or through the shelter's new registration window. The asylum seekers are overwhelmingly from Mexico, with a smaller number from Cuba. The Casa del Migrante has implemented strict protocols for COVID-19, requiring everyone to wear face masks, remain at a safe distance, and have their temperature checked. The floors and surfaces are disinfected two to three times a day. To date, there have not been any reported COVID-19 cases.
Mexicali, Baja California <i>Grupo Beta</i>	Closed	~150 people <i>May 22, 2020</i>	The number of individuals on the Mexicali list has not changed since mid-March. Hotel Migrante is the only shelter in the city that remains open to new entrants. ⁹ Over the summer, temperatures in Mexicali can reach more than 105 degrees and are a concern for the migrant population.

Metering & Asylum Waitlists: May 2020 (continued)

Port of Entry <i>List Administrator</i>	Waitlist Status	# of Asylum Seekers on List <i>Date Recorded</i>	Recent Changes
Tijuana, Baja California <i>Grupo Beta / Support from asylum seekers</i>	Closed	9,600 people <i>May 21, 2020</i>	<p>The number of individuals on the Tijuana list has not changed since mid-March. The majority of these asylum seekers are from Mexico. It is unclear what percent of asylum seekers on the waitlist continue to be in Tijuana.</p> <p>Only two of the city's two dozen migrant shelters continue to accept new entrants, and it is on a case by case basis. Many asylum seekers on the list live in crowded apartments. Most of them have lost their jobs during the pandemic and have struggled to pay rent and buy food. Local organizations such as Al Otro Lado and Espacio Migrante have provided asylum seekers with prepaid cards for food and hygiene products but have not been able to keep up with the overwhelming demand.</p>

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

ENDNOTES

1. This number was originally published in April 2020 as 14,400. However, it was missing the family list in Ciudad Acuña (~450 people). The April 2020 report has been updated accordingly.
2. Alberto Pradilla, “Desde el inicio de la pandemia el INM detiene diez veces menos migrantes que hace un año,” Animal Politico, May 23, 2020, <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2020/05/pandemia-inm-detiene-10-veces-migrantes/>.
3. Andrea Jiménez, “No habrá recursos para migrantes: delegado,” El Imparcial, May 26, 2020, <https://www.elimparcial.com/mexicali/mexicali/No-habra-recursos-economicos-para-migrantes-reitera-delegado-federal-20200524-0018.html>.
4. Special thanks to B. Gómez for collecting information on the asylum waitlist in Matamoros.
5. Molly Hennessy-Fiske, “Cuban doctors and nurses seeking asylum keep border clinic running during pandemic,” Los Angeles Times, May 25, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-05-25/asylum-seekers-keep-border-clinic-open-during-pandemic>.
6. Carlos Figueroa, “Quince migrantes en albergue de Tamaulipas se recuperan de Covid-19,” La Jornada, May 6, 2020, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/ultimas/estados/2020/05/06/quince-migrantes-en-albergue-de-tamaulipas-se-recuperan-de-covid-19-8410.html>.
7. Josué Rodríguez, “Casas del migrante seguirán cerradas en Piedras Negras,” Vanguardia, May 20, 2020, <https://vanguardia.com.mx/articulo/casas-del-migrante-seguiran-cerradas-en-piedras-negras>.
8. Rafael Carranza “More migrants giving up asylum claims as pandemic shuts down processing at border,” Arizona Republic, May 11, 2020, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/border-issues/2020/05/11/more-migrants-giving-up-asylum-claims-leaving-arizona-mexico-border/5171469002/>.
9. Heriberto Reyes, “Albergues de Mexicali ya no están recibiendo migrantes,” Sintesis TV, May 8, 2020, <https://sintesistv.com.mx/albergues-de-mexicali-ya-no-estan-recibiendo-migrantes/>.