

Humanity on the Move

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It is hard to miss migration in the headlines. Politicians use the plight of migrants and refugees as a bargaining tool; breathless reporters broadcast before rows of cots full of asylum seekers in airport terminals; lines of families wait at border checkpoints to be processed; children are carried from rickety boats; and lifeless bodies wash up on beaches and river banks. What has surprised me, a US-based researcher focused on examining human mobility in Central America, is the prevalence of this news coming from around the world.

If you turned on the news in Costa Rica in the fall of 2023, you saw reporters at the border with Panama talking about the “collapse” of the system due to the large number of migrants who had crossed the supposedly impenetrable 100-mile long Darien Gap. Some migrants hoped to continue on to the United States, while others sought refuge in Costa Rica. Yet Costa Rica’s previously welcoming attitude was strained by the reality of refugees coming from both its north (Nicaragua) and south, particularly Venezuela, Colombia, and Peru.

If you turned on the news in Spain in early 2024, you saw daily updates about the number of migrants who had traveled up to 1,000 miles into the Atlantic Ocean in overloaded *cayuco* fishing boats (basically large canoes) to reach the Canary Islands from the shores of Morocco, Western Sahara and even Mauritania, Senegal, and The Gambia. The relatively more fortunate flew from Senegal and elsewhere, made multiple-day air connections in Madrid on their way to Nicaragua, and only then began their journey on foot toward the United States.

[More people are on the move than ever before](#). In 2020, the [International Organization for Migration \(IOM\) estimated](#) that 281 million people or 3.6% of the world’s population lived outside of their country of birth (including both regular and irregular migrants), while nearly three times that number are estimated to have moved within their country of birth. The largest share of international migrants live in Europe and Asia (each approximately 30% of the total, compared to North America’s 21%). In the 30 years to 2020, migration to Europe and Asia rose by approximately 75%, while migration to North America rose by 113%.

Migrants disproportionately worked in the most dangerous and “essential” jobs at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic – in the [United States](#) and [worldwide](#). They not only suffered horrific health consequences, but many were trapped in place and faced greater public hostility. As scholars [anticipated](#), the pandemic brought a pause and then an intense restart of global migration. For example, in Spain, the “Western African route” to the Canary Islands had [declined to 1,500 arrivals per year](#) in the decade prior to 2020. By the close of 2023, however, [57,000 migrants had arrived](#) to the islands during the year in rickety *cayucos*, and a record 7,000 migrants arrived in January. By most accounts, the numbers will remain high into the foreseeable future given [political unrest in Senegal](#), tenuous immigration control collaboration with Morocco (for the Western African route) and Niger (for the Western Mediterranean route), and droughts fueling current intra-regional movement that will likely lead, as it often does, to [increased extra-regional movement](#).

Meanwhile at the US southern border, after [relatively low numbers for most of the 2010s](#), irregular migration dramatically spiked in 2019, despite the harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric and the Trump administration’s enforcement policies, followed by a lull as COVID-19 swept the globe. Following COVID-19, migrant “encounters” by border officials – both apprehensions and expulsions, which could include multiple “encounters” of the same individual – took off, with record-breaking highs in FY2022 and FY2023. These increases were spurred in part by COVID-19’s disastrous economic impact in migrant destination countries, increased state hostility to immigrants (in some places), and pent-up demand and ability to migrate. The first quarter of FY2024 has extended the run of high numbers.

Significantly, there was an appreciable decrease in the number and share of migrants from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador (Figure 1, 22-38% decrease from FY21-FY23), and an increase in the number from the Andes and other less typical countries of departure. Venezuela is probably the most striking example, with an increase of more than 400% in FY 2022 and 2023, eclipsing all of the Central American countries. Along with these shifts in the nationality of border arrivals, since the end of COVID-19 border closures and Title 42 (immediate) expulsions, there has been a large increase in the share of [families arriving at the border](#). The shift to families is important, although not fully understood.

Figure 1

Annual CBP Migrant Encounters at the U.S.-Mexico Border, by Country of Origin

Fiscal Year 2021	Fiscal Year 2022	Fiscal Year 2023	2021-2023
Mexico 655,594	Mexico 808,339	Mexico 717,333	+9%
Honduras 319,324	Guatemala 231,565	Venezuela 266,071	+447%
Guatemala 283,035	Cuba 220,908	Guatemala 220,085	-22%
El Salvador 98,690	Honduras 213,023	Honduras 213,686	-33%
Ecuador 96,150	Venezuela 187,716	Other 172,517	+885%
Brazil 56,881	Nicaragua 163,876	Colombia 159,536	+2,472%
Nicaragua 50,109	Colombia 125,172	Cuba 142,352	+268%
Venezuela 48,678	El Salvador 97,030	Ecuador 116,229	+21%
Haiti 47,255	Other 60,037	Nicaragua 99,496	+99%
Cuba 38,674	Haiti 53,910	Haiti 76,130	+61%
Other 17,510	Brazil 53,457	Peru 75,719	+2,268%
Colombia 6,202	Peru 50,662	El Salvador 61,515	-38%
Russia 4,103	Ukraine 25,364	Russia 43,210	+953%
Romania 4,067	Ecuador 24,060	India 41,770	+1,514%
Peru 3,197	Russia 21,763	Brazil 27,687	-51%
India 2,588	India 18,308	China 24,314	+5,303%
Turkey 1,409	Turkey 15,445	Turkey 15,542	+1,003%
Ukraine 676	Romania 5,992	Romania 2,088	-47%
China 450	China 2,176	Ukraine 246	-64%

Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection <https://bit.ly/3j3tP2l>

Image credit: Washington Office on Latin America, 2023

Note: Encounters=apprehensions and expulsions, which could include multiple encounters of the same individual

How do we talk about and respond to this evolving landscape? In many ways, our narratives and policies have yet to catch up with reality. As preeminent migration scholar [Hein de Haas challenges us](#), perhaps a good starting point would be to begin to recognize the movement of people as a normal process, which has happened within borders (think urbanization) and across borders since the beginning of time.