

## Report Summary

Over the last decade, a growing number of Central Americans have been forced to flee their countries of origin due to widespread criminal violence, life-threatening gender and domestic violence, and extreme economic hardship. This escalating humanitarian crisis has been largely neglected by the US and Mexican governments, which have turned a blind eye to the lack of safe and legal channels to claim asylum, as well as to the deadly risks and systematic abuses faced by Central Americans in their journey to safety.

Between October and December 2018, a large caravan that originated in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, made its way through Guatemala and Mexico—ultimately drawing an estimated total of more than 17,900 caravan members. Due to its size, cohesion, and organization, the caravan fueled intense monitoring and reporting by journalists and human rights defenders. In general, this attention deterred large-scale criminal activities and human rights violations. Importantly, it also helped rally humanitarian aid and highlighted the need for policy responses. However, the protection offered by caravans is extremely narrow.

### Our key findings

1. **Neither the caravans—nor the Mexican government’s response to the caravans—provided adequate protection for women and children traveling alone.** Overall, pressure to stay with the caravans put the most vulnerable populations at high risk by preventing them from seeking assistance and support when needed, as well as by fueling misinformation. The government’s response had few or no age or gender considerations.
2. **The caravans left women and children behind.** Structural barriers, such as security considerations and having to care for children, prevented women from participating in decision-making meetings. As the groups advanced, the presence of women and families reduced, while young single men took the lead.
3. **The humanitarian response from Mexican authorities and nongovernmental actors was lacking and reproduced systemic obstacles for women and children.** Service provision was intermittent, placed a heavy reliance on overburdened civil society organizations and inexperienced volunteers, and was distributed without engaging beneficiaries.
4. **The Mexican asylum system has considerable shortcomings.** These include: prolonged or unnecessary use of immigration detention; proceedings lasting for years that force applicants to remain in insecure areas; limited integration options; and underdeveloped and under-resourced refugee status and children’s best interest determination procedures.
5. **Institutional challenges were aggravated by the Mexican government’s lack of leadership and preparedness.** Even though the advance of the caravans was widely reported, when they reached Mexico there was no protocol in place to grant humanitarian assistance or process the arrival of large numbers of people. To date, no long-term policy has been outlined.
6. **The illegal US practice known as “metering”—limiting the number of asylum seekers who can present at a port of entry—jeopardizes the rights and integrity of people seeking international protection.** As it has no clear regulations, oversight, or accountability, metering prevents the most vulnerable populations from being identified and leads to corruption and abuse.
7. **Unaccompanied children are being denied access to protection in the United States.** Children were left in particularly vulnerable positions and subject to trafficking and exploitation due to US metering practices and collaboration with turn-back policies by Mexican authorities.
8. **The US Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), also known as “Remain in Mexico,” created insurmountable barriers to due process, access to counsel, and the ability to present meaningful defenses to removal before US courts.**
9. **Mexico’s immigration policies seem to be shifting back to its old deterrence and containment approach.** Without adequate oversight or human rights considerations, immigration enforcement in Mexico will continue to violate rights and put people in dangerous situations.
10. **Mexico’s inconsistent policies, US policies narrowing avenues to protection, and heightened xenophobia suggest that future caravans might face even grimmer conditions.**

## Our top recommendations

### Design and implement a regional strategy

- El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and the US should design and implement a comprehensive, rights-based, gender- and age-sensitive regional strategy that honors domestic and international obligations to refugees and migrants, ensures adequate humanitarian relief to people on the move, and addresses the root causes of displacement.

### Honor domestic and international law

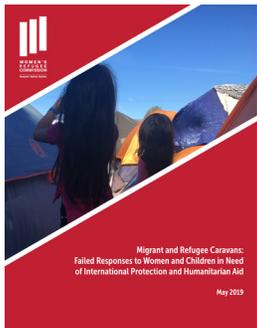
- The US should allow asylum seekers—including unaccompanied children—to present themselves at ports of entry, and should stop implementing metering and the MPP.
- Mexico should oppose US actions that limit access to protection in violation of international law.
- Mexico and the US should establish communication, collaboration, and referral mechanisms to respect the best interests of children where appropriate.
- Mexico and the US should streamline their asylum systems—while still ensuring due process, family unity, and *non-refoulement*—and enhance reception capacity.
- All relevant actors should actively counter growing anti-immigrant rhetoric and practices.

### Ensure adequate humanitarian relief

- All relevant actors should prioritize planning and preparedness for large displacements of people.
- Mexico should comply with international standards and guidelines for shelter and service provision.
- International humanitarian agencies should offer technical expertise and capacity.
- All actors should ensure availability of and access to information.
- Human rights defenders should continue to monitor and take adequate measures when abuse is identified.

### Address root causes

- All governments should continue to advance initiatives that promote regional human security, rule of law, accountability, and prosperity.



The full report is available at <https://wrc.ms/2Jp4YVq>.

## Women's Refugee Commission

The Women's Refugee Commission improves the lives and protects the rights of women, children, and youth who have been displaced by conflict and crisis. We research their needs, identify solutions, and advocate for programs and policies to strengthen their resilience and drive change in humanitarian practice. Since our founding in 1989, we have been a leading expert on the needs of refugee women, children, and youth and the policies that can protect and empower them.

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