

Illegal Immigration to the United States

The duration and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic will shape migration to the U.S. Southwest Border into 2021, along with traditional push and pull factors stemming from weak economic and political conditions in the region. COVID-19's impact on Caribbean nations increases the chance of a mass migration event from Cuba or Haiti. Although the majority of migrants do not pose a national security or public safety threat, pathways used by migrants to travel to the United States have been exploited by threat actors. As a result, surges of migrants could undermine our ability to effectively secure the border without adversely impacting other parts of the immigration system.

Illegal Immigration via Land

The duration and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States and within Central and South America and the Caribbean will shape illegal immigration to the U.S. Southwest Border, exacerbating the underlying economic and political conditions in the region. As COVID-19-related restrictions on mobility ease, we are seeing an increase in illegal immigration flows to pre-pandemic levels.

- Illegal immigration flows within the Western Hemisphere have begun to increase after a short-term decline in response to the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic and countries instituting border transit restrictions. Over the medium term, mass migration might occur if the economies of the Caribbean, Central and South American countries continue to decline and if the health and humanitarian response capabilities continue to deteriorate due to COVID-19. Mass migration especially might occur if these negative conditions are coupled with an economic resurgence in the United States.
- COVID-19-related international travel restrictions that many countries have instituted have curtailed some illegal immigration from outside the Western Hemisphere. When these measures are lifted, there will be sporadic illegal immigration into and through the region.
- Weak job markets, high crime rates, and governmental or non-state repression will

remain key drivers of U.S.-bound migration from the Caribbean and Central and South America, especially as COVID-19-related citizen mobility restrictions ease in the region. Seasonal weather changes and perceptions of U.S. and Mexican immigration and enforcement policies and measures also will shape migration patterns as inter-governmental division and inconsistent messaging continue to impede Congressionally mandated immigration enforcement policies.

Human Trafficking

Human traffickers continue to use force, fraud, and coercion against millions of victims worldwide, as many of them attempt to gain entry to the United States via the southwest land border. Many victims never seek assistance from law enforcement because of language barriers, fear of retaliation from their traffickers and/or fear of law enforcement. This allows traffickers to force victims into labor or commercial sexual exploitation. Traffickers continue to target people they believe to be susceptible for a wide variety of reasons including but not limited to psychological or emotional vulnerability, economic hardship, natural disasters, political instability or a lack of a social safety net.

- Increased illegal immigration to the U.S. Southwest Border will require United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to re-examine how resources are properly aligned at the Southwest Border, likely impacting the larger asylum system. Increasing numbers of

apprehensions will lead to an increased number of fear claims, requiring USCIS to dedicate additional resources to protection screenings and away from addressing case backlogs such as the asylum case backlog.

- Social distancing requirements could continue to affect work taking place in detention facilities along the Southwest border. Budgetary impediments towards immigration enforcement and lack of bipartisan support of detention measures continue to undermine U.S. immigration enforcement policies. Such inconsistent practices continue to lead to the release of dangerous criminal aliens and absconders who may then commit additional crimes when they might otherwise have been expeditiously detained and removed from the United States.
- Since 2014, DHS has experienced repeated illegal immigration surges at the Southwest Border. DHS anticipates that the number of apprehensions at the border will significantly climb post-pandemic, with the potential for another surge as those who were previously prevented from seeking entry into the United States arrive at the border and as poor economic conditions around the world fuel migration. This high volume of illegal immigration, including unprecedented numbers of family units and unaccompanied alien children arrivals, stretch government resources, and create a humanitarian and border security crisis that cripples the immigration system.
- Record migration at the Southwest Border took up limited U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention resources, drove increases in the agency's average daily population (ADP), resulted in decreased interior arrests (including arrests of criminals), and forced ICE to balance its critical public safety mission in the interior with its support for DHS efforts to secure the border. As the pandemic subsides, ICE will conduct additional enforcement operations to uphold its public safety mission and address the growing fugitive backlog.
- DHS projects that until fundamental changes are made to the immigration enforcement process, including legislation that addresses current legal loopholes that incentivize high levels of illegal immigration, the United States will periodically experience additional humanitarian and border security crises.



Illegal Immigration at Sea

The impact of COVID-19 very likely will affect maritime migration from both migrant origin and transit countries in the Caribbean through 2021. Weak socio-economic conditions in Cuba, political instability and food insecurity in Haiti, and the uncertainty of COVID-19 impacts in the region will increase the chances of a maritime mass migration event, although the overall risk remains low.

- Interviews of interdicted migrants reveal that some still desire to come to the United States, regardless of the risk posed by COVID-19, rather than face the deteriorating economic conditions in their home countries.
- Measures such as border closures, quarantines, and a reduction in legitimate vessel traffic can disrupt migrant flows; however, increased food insecurity and unemployment, reduced economic opportunities, a lack of medical infrastructure, and other second- and third-order effects in migrants' home countries serve as likely push factors resulting in increased maritime migration to the United States.
- In the event of increased maritime migration, the U.S. Coast Guard and USCIS will need to increase interdiction and screening resources in the region. This could result in the reallocation of limited resources, impacting the ability to conduct other operations.