

# How Cruel Migration Policies Hurt People

February 2026



"Know your Rights" Workshop for youth and migrant people, carried out at the border wall between Mexico and the U.S., Tijuana, Mexico, 2025. Credit: AFSC



# Context

Externalizing migration and border controls is becoming a frequent practice in the Latin American region. The term refers to when a country (typically a northern country) delegates to other countries actions that it would normally carry out within its own territory. These actions may include implementing measures to curb migration before migrants reach the country, complete immigration procedures outside national borders (processing applications for asylum or refugee status), and returning migrants to third countries.

The states that implement these actions present them as national security strategies, necessary to safeguard their territories against threats posed by organized crime and terrorism. However, far from achieving this objective, they foster a criminalizing and dehumanizing narrative toward people in situations of forced mobility (migrants and asylum and refugee seekers), which increases discrimination and racism and exacerbates human rights violations.

In the August 2025 report to the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UN), the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, Gehad Madi, defines the externalization of migration as “forms of international cooperation that shift responsibility for migration governance from destination States to other States, increasing the risk of human rights violations for people directly affected by these measures”.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, “Externalization of migration governance and its effect on the human rights of migrants” A80/302, August 04, 2025, available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/80/302> (consulted on: December 15, 2025).



The report explains that the externalization of migration takes place through three main practices: (1) preventing migrants from reaching the destination country; (2) shifting asylum procedures, in whole or in part, to third countries; and (3) returning or expelling people to countries other than their country of origin. All three practices are currently present across Latin America.<sup>2</sup>

These measures aim to discourage migration toward the northern part of the Americas and to place barriers on regular entry from other borders. For instance, in 2025, the United States (U.S.) entered into agreements with governments in Central and South America, under which those countries agreed to receive deported individuals, even when those individuals were of other nationalities.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, the number of people subject to forced return (whether through deportation or due to fear) has increased. According to the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS), as of October 27, 2025<sup>4</sup>, more than 2 million foreign nationals had left the United States: 527,000 through deportation mechanisms, and approximately 1.6 million chose “self-deportation” amid constant threats of apprehension and sanctions.<sup>5</sup>

A report by the National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) of Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia also documented that between January and August 2025, a total of 14,000 people,<sup>6</sup> were recorded as part of a reverse migration flow (contrary to the traditional south-to-north pattern), returning from the United States and Mexico to Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia.

In practice, as this report will show, the weakening of protection and asylum systems has led to increased violence against hundreds of thousands of people fleeing countries affected by sociopolitical conflict, war, genocide, state collapse, and displacement driven by the climate crisis.

In addition to externalization policies, another key factor has emerged: the cancellation of U.S. cooperation funding, which has led to the closure or weakening of essential programs for assisting people on the move across the Americas and has undermined civil society’s capacity to provide protection and humanitarian support.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Banished by Bargain: third Country deportation watch, official website, available at: <https://www.thirdcountrydeportationwatch.org/> (consulted on: December 15, 2025).

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Press Release, October 27, 2025, available at: <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2025/10/27/dhs-removes-more-half-million-illegal-aliens-us> (consulted on: December 17, 2025).

<sup>5</sup> La Jornada, “Anti-immigrant U.S. campaign airs on Mexican broadcast television, YouTube, April 20, 2025, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUp8ZAO2314> (consulted on: December 17, 2025).

<sup>6</sup> Ombudsman’s Office of Costa Rica, Ombudsman’s Office of Panama and Ombudsman’s Office of Colombia, “Migración inversa en la ruta Costa Rica- Panamá- Colombia: desafíos de protección y necesidad de una respuesta humanitaria regional” [Reverse migration on the Costa Rica-Panama-Colombia route: protection challenges and the need for a regional humanitarian response], August 2025, available only in Spanish at: <https://www.oacnudh.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Informe-flujo-migratorio-flujo-inverso-Costa-Rica-Panama-Colombia.pdf> (consulted on: December 17, 2025).



“Know your Rights” Workshop for youth and migrant people, carried out at the border wall between Mexico and the U.S., Tijuana, Mexico, 2025. Credit: AFSC.



In a context where figures often dominate the discussion, it is crucial to understand and highlight what happens to the people behind the numbers. Who are they, and what are they facing? Addressing these questions is the main purpose of this report. It is our duty to draw attention to the serious consequences of these cruel policies, which violate the most fundamental values that define us as humans: dignity, compassion, respect, and love for one another.

# Making the Invisible Visible to Act Collectively: Documentation Cycle

This report is the result of a collective effort led by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and implemented in collaboration with: Casa Violeta, of the Organización Mujeres en Superación in Guatemala; the Fray Matías de Córdoba Human Rights Center and the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA) in Mexico; the Center for the Integration of Migrant Workers (CIMITRA) and the Independent Monitoring Group of El Salvador (GMIES) in El Salvador; and the Jesuit Service for Migrants in Costa Rica (SJM-CR). The process was further supported by two field-based contributors in Tijuana and Guatemala, as well as two collaborators providing support at the regional level.

In light of the context described above, we set out to gather evidence to document the impacts and direct effects on people who experience the implementation of restrictive and externalized migration policies. This collective effort enabled us to better understand who the affected people are and their protection and humanitarian assistance needs; the persecution and criminalization they face, and it also allowed us to identify the main human rights violations occurring during detention, deportation, forced return or reverse migration flows, as well as situations of immobility or “strandedness.”

Between June and August 2025, a total of 364 interviews were conducted in strategic locations across the countries mentioned above. In Mexico, interviews were carried out in migrant shelters located in Tijuana, in the state of Baja California, along the country’s northern border, and in Tapachula, in the state of Chiapas, along the southern border. In El Salvador, interviews were conducted across 10 departments: San Salvador, La Libertad, Usulután, Chalatenango, La Unión, Cabañas, Sonsonate, San Vicente, Santa Ana, and Cuscatlán. In Guatemala, interviews took place in Guatemala City and at the Tecun Uman border. In Costa Rica, interviews were conducted along the southern border.

The documentation process was not simple, as civil society organizations and researchers faced restrictions imposed by migration authorities in each country when attempting to approach deported individuals. As a result, they had to develop alternative strategies to be able to talk with deportees in areas surrounding official arrival centers.



Temporary Attention Service for Migrants (CATEM), Costa Rica.  
Credit: Yader Miranda / AFSC.

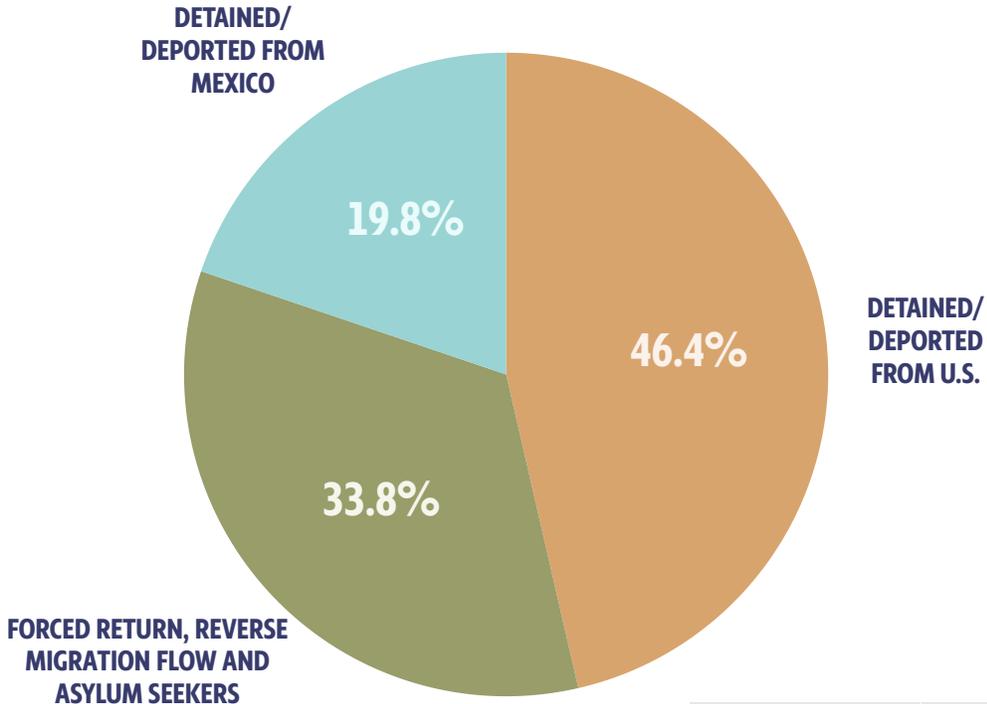


Temporary Attention Service for Migrants (CATEM), Costa Rica.  
Credit: Yader Miranda / AFSC.

An initial profile of the interviewed group yields the following findings: of the 364 people interviewed, 55% were men, 44% women, and 1% identified as non-binary. The predominant age range was between 18 and 35 years old. The group also included children, adolescents and older adults who required care.

The documented cases can be categorized into three profiles: (1) people detained and deported from the United States; (2) people detained and deported from Mexico; and (3) people subject to forced return, reverse migration flows, or situations of immobility.

**PROFILES IDENTIFIED IN THE DOCUMENTATION**



PROFILES	WOMEN	MEN	NON BINARY
DETAINED/ DEPORTED FROM U.S.	63	106	0
DETAINED/ DEPORTED FROM MEXICO	23	49	0
FORCED RETURN, REVERSE MIGRATION FLOW AND ASYLUM SEEKERS	76	12	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>162</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>PERCENT</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>1%</b>

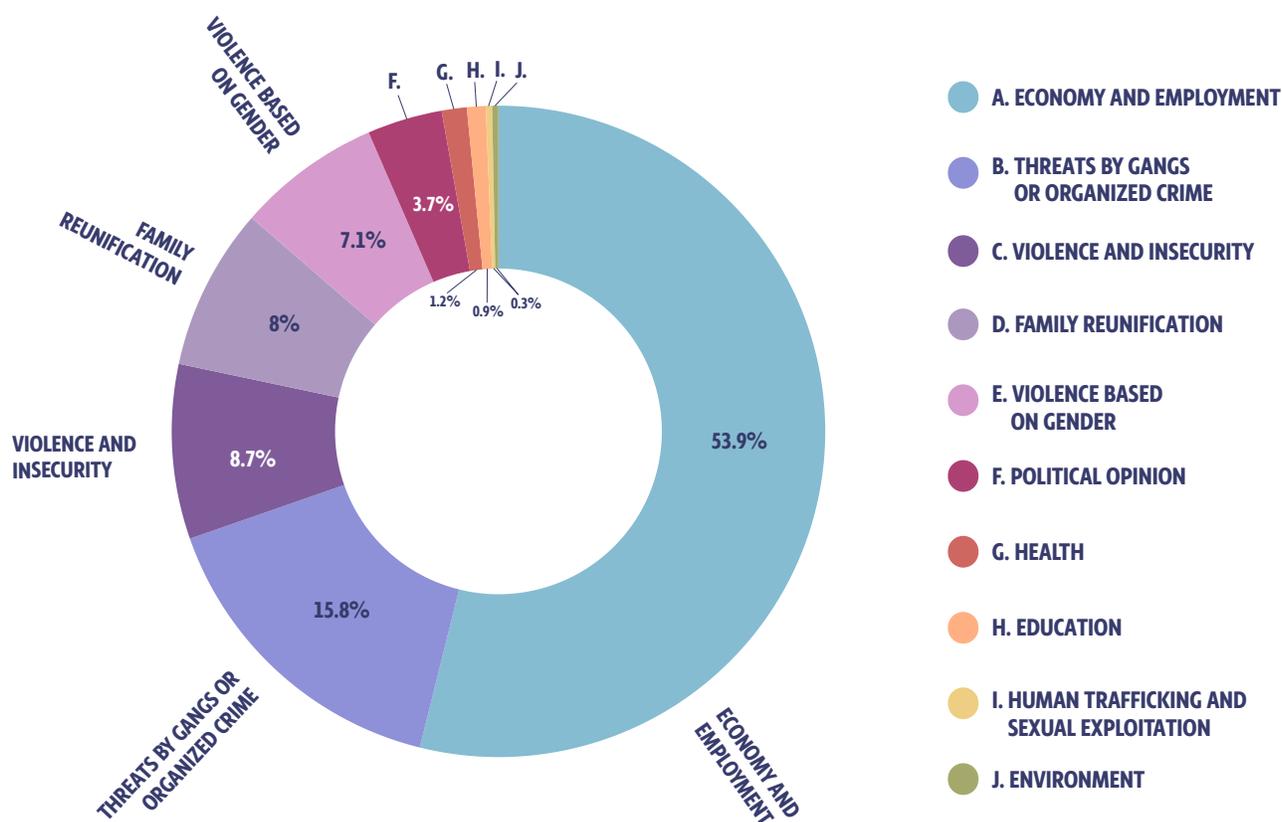
Of the people detained and deported by U.S. authorities, 70% were interviewed in El Salvador, all of them of Salvadoran nationality. Another 16% were interviewed at Mexico's southern border, 6% in Guatemala, 4% in northern Mexico, and 4% in Costa Rica. The most common nationalities among those interviewed, from most to least frequent, were Salvadoran, Mexican, and Venezuelan. Less common nationalities included people from Honduras, Guatemala, Cameroon, Cuba, and Colombia, and one person from Eritrea.

Among people detained and deported by Mexican authorities, 69% were interviewed in Guatemala, primarily people of Guatemalan and Venezuelan nationality. To a lesser extent, the group included Salvadoran, Honduran, Nicaraguan, Cuban, Haitian, and Colombian nationals.

Within the group of people subject to forced return, experiencing reverse migration (from north to south), or who are stranded, 32% were interviewed in El Salvador. The predominant nationalities within this group, listed from most to least frequent, were Salvadoran, Venezuelan, Haitian, Cuban, Guatemalan, and Honduran. Less common nationalities included Mexican, U.S., Nicaraguan, and Peruvian. One person from Ghana and one stateless person were also interviewed.

Across all groups, interviewees identified economic and employment precarity as the primary reason for leaving their countries of origin. They also pointed to other forms of structural violence and contextual factors that make it difficult to secure sufficient income for a dignified life and also threats from gangs or organized crime, gender-based violence, and other related forms of violence.

## MOTIVES FOR WHICH PEOPLE HAVE MIGRATED



# Key Findings

## DETENTION AND DEPORTATION: SPACES CHARACTERIZED BY TORTURE AND CRUELTY

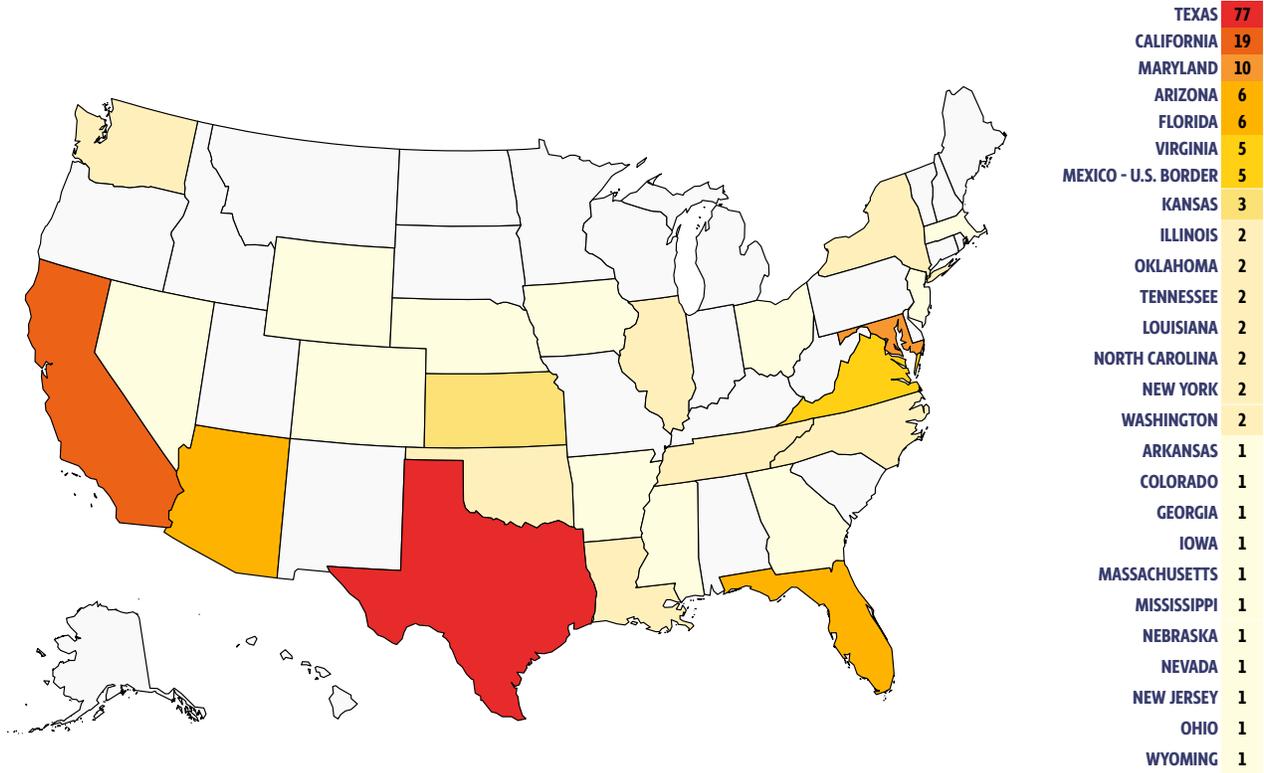
As mentioned above, the number of people held in immigration detention in the United States has increased. According to official data from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), as of November 30, 2025, a total of 65,735 people were held in detention, 73.6% of whom had no criminal record.<sup>7</sup> Reports from U.S.-based human rights organizations that monitor deportation flights indicate an increase between January and November 2025, with a total of 1,975 flights, compared to 1,437 during the same period of the previous year.<sup>8</sup>

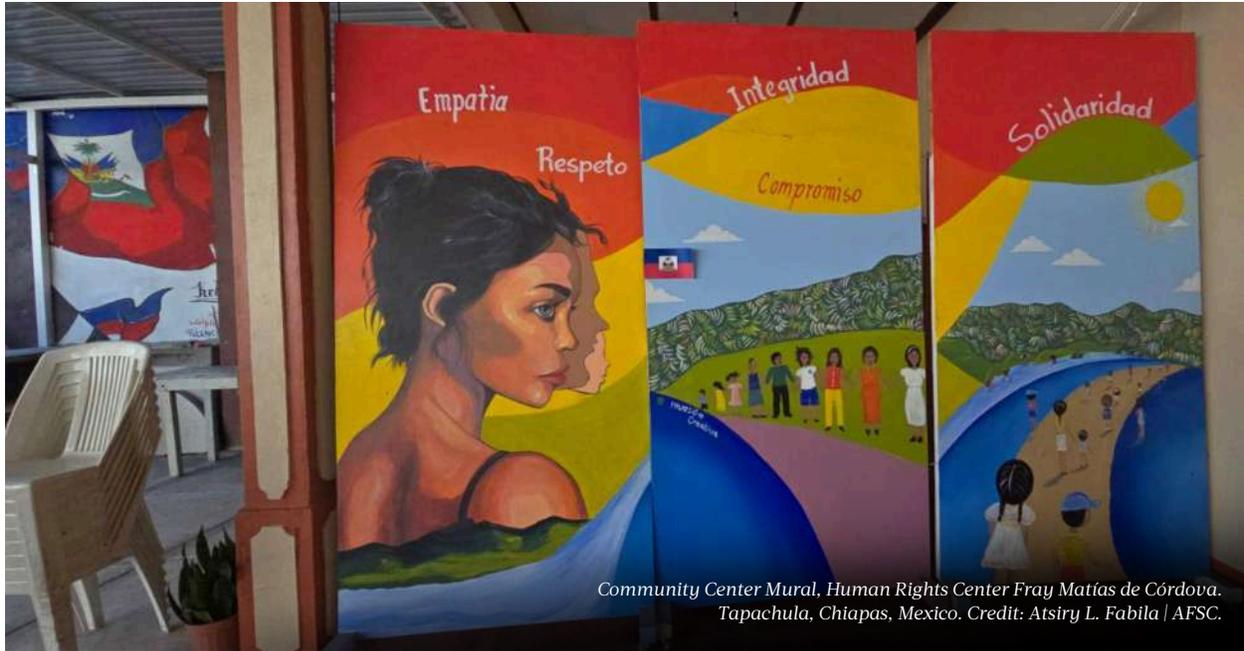
The information collected indicates that Texas is the U.S. state with the highest number of pre-deportation detentions, accounting for 77 of the 169 people interviewed, followed by California, Maryland, Arizona, Florida, and Virginia. This pattern reflects a greater concentration of detentions in border states and in states with large migrant populations.

<sup>7</sup> Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC), online database, available at: [https://tracreports.org/immigration/quickfacts/#detention\\_held](https://tracreports.org/immigration/quickfacts/#detention_held) (consulted on: December 16, 2025).

<sup>8</sup> Human Rights First, ICE Flight Monitor, December 11, 2025, available at: <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/ice-flight-monitor-november-2025-monthly-report/> (consulted on: December 16, 2025).

### STATES WHERE MIGRANTS WERE DETAINED AND DEPORTED BY THE U.S.





Community Center Mural, Human Rights Center Fray Matías de Córdoba, Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico. Credit: Atsiry L. Fabila | AFSC.

The manner in which these detentions and subsequent deportations are carried out, in some cases, constitutes torture,<sup>9</sup> or, at the very least, cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment.

*“In Colombia, I was a victim of domestic violence, psychological and physical abuse by my child’s father. I was detained in the state of Chicago while working as an Uber driver. I was detained violently, my belongings were taken from me, and I was separated from my baby for several hours. He was born in the United States. I was detained for 7 days, then traveled for 3 nights and 3 days, and was handed over to Mexican immigration authorities in Ciudad Juárez. There, we were detained again for 7 days until we were taken to Mexico City, without being provided with hygiene supplies... I decided to leave for Ecuador.”*

*Violeta (pseudonym), Colombian, 34 years old, detained by U.S. authorities and deported to Mexico. Interviewed in Guatemala.*

In addition to the violence endured during detention and deportation, such as intimidation, threats, humiliation, and overcrowding, participants in the interviews also described other violations of their rights, including lack of access to due process, acts of discrimination and racism, sexual and gender-based violence, and family separation. Of the 169 people deported from the U.S., 38 reported being denied or having limited access to food, water, and basic hygiene items, and 25 said they had been held in cold rooms (“ice boxes”). These testimonies add to the cases of abuse documented by human rights organizations inside detention centers in the country.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Convention against Torture and other Cruel, inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, December 10, 1984, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-against-torture-and-other-cruel-inhuman-or-degrading> (consulted on: January 23, 2026)

<sup>10</sup>Human Rights Watch, “You feel like your life is over” Abusive practices in three Florida detention centers since January 2025, July 21, 2025, available: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/07/21/you-feel-like-your-life-is-over/abusive-practices-at-three-florida-immigration> (consulted on: December 15, 2025).



Paso Canoas, Costa Rica. Credit: Rodrigo Henríquez / AFSC.



Temporary Attention Service for Migrants (CATEM), Costa Rica. Credit: Rodrigo Henríquez / AFSC.

*(In) El Paso, Texas I was there for three days. After three days, they took me out in shackles on my hands, feet, waist, everything. They put me on a plane, and when it landed, it said McAllen, Texas, and I was detained there for another nine days... the treatment was bad..... when you are a migrant, you are not allowed to speak because they beat you. The food was bad too. Three Americans, about two meters tall beat a Venezuelan man in front of me... I ate and slept on the floor.”*

*Jose (pseudonym), Venezuelan, 37 years old, detained and deported by U.S. authorities and handed over to Mexican migration authorities, who transferred him to the southern border in Villahermosa, from where he began a reverse migration journey through Central America.*

In the case of Mexico, among the 72 people who reported having been held in immigration detention, 29% stated that they were not informed about the process they were undergoing, 13% reported an excessive use of force, and 10% reported having been subjected to discrimination and racism, psychological abuse, and other forms of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

*The most terrible part is the transfers. The transfers are brutal. They chain you at the hands and feet and put a chain around your waist, that is a torture”*

*Agustín (pseudonym), Mexican, age 40, detained/deported by U.S. authorities. He was later transferred to different detention center due to overcrowding. Interview conducted in Tijuana.*

Another area of concern is the length of time people were deprived of their liberty. In the United States, 42% of those interviewed remained in detention for periods ranging from 1 to 12 months. Even more alarming, 4 people were detained for more than a year, and 24 reported having been held in multiple detention centers. These prolonged periods of detention clearly have physical and emotional consequences, as noted by the World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>11</sup> The main impacts documented include panic attacks, mood changes, fatigue, feelings of defeat, insecurity or distrust, disorientation, sadness or hopelessness, restlessness and nervousness, feelings of guilt, sleep disturbances, and fear.

<sup>11</sup> World Health Organization, “Addressing the health challenges in immigration detention, and alternatives to detention: a country implementation guide”, 2022, available at: <https://iris.who.int/items/9a5159f0-28df-4cd2-980e-93822cfe1a0> (consulted on: December 17, 2025).

“...I thought they were going to release me, but then it was back onto the buses to Ciudad Juárez that they restrained me again. That’s when I really didn’t like it, I am not a criminal... They tightened the restraints again, so much that I started to cry. From there, they took us to Ciudad Juárez, and then on a plane to Villahermosa.”

*Miguel (pseudonym), Venezuelan, detained and deported by U.S. authorities and handed over to Mexican migration authorities, who transferred him to the southern border in Villahermosa. From there, he began a reverse migration journey through Central America.*

Unfortunately, the traumatic experiences endured in the context of these types of deportations are not experienced only once. For example, 16% of the people deported from the United States to Mexico were subsequently deported again to another country in Central America, so they once again had to go through violence and arbitrary treatment at the hands of Mexican authorities.

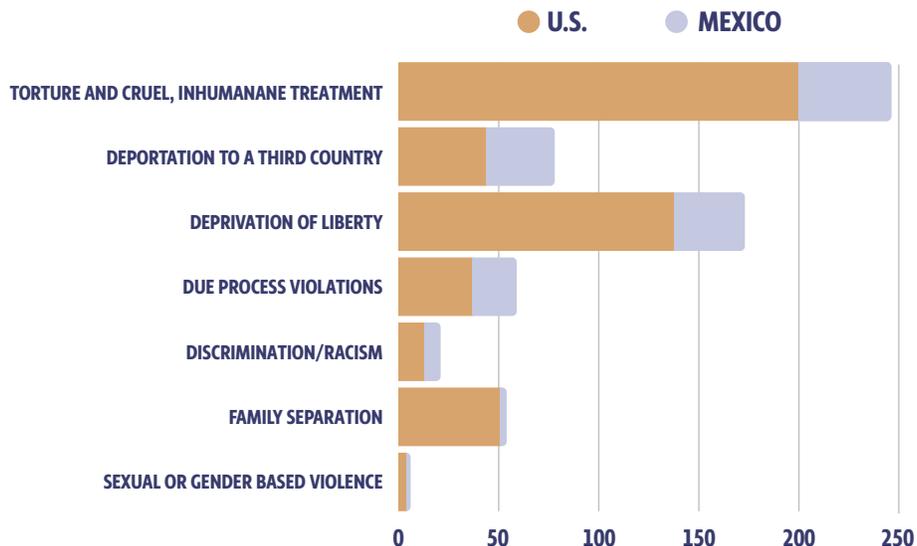
...A Mexican police officer took us across for 80,000 pesos. He kept us in a house that was supposedly in Arizona, then he demanded more money, and when we couldn’t pay, he assaulted the children. We managed to escape one day when the officer left, but the U.S. police caught us and deported us to Guatemala. Out of fear, we said we were from there so we wouldn’t be deported again. We then returned to El Salvador because of the children, who were left traumatized.”

*Salvadoran family, victims of kidnapping. Deported to Guatemala by U.S. authorities. Interview conducted in El Salvador.*

The following chart illustrates the number of violations that respondents reported experiencing in each country, with the United States being the country where most of these acts occurred.

The practices described infringe international obligations outlined in several landmark instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the American Convention on Human Rights; and the Inter-American Convention to Prevent and Punish Torture, among others. More importantly, these actions are inhumane and harm the dignity of people.

**HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AGAINST DETAINED/ DEPORTED PERSONS**



## DISRUPTED LIFE PROJECTS

According to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, a life project “concerns the full realization of the affected person, taking into account their vocation, aptitudes, circumstances, potential, and aspirations, which allow them to reasonably set certain expectations and pursue them. [...] The concept of a ‘life project’ is akin to the concept of personal fulfillment, which in turn is based on the options that an individual may have for leading their life and achieving the goals that they set for themselves. Strictly speaking, these options are the expression and guarantee of freedom.”<sup>12</sup>

In the words of a migrant, “a life project has to do with the possibilities of working, providing an education to my child, to settle my family, making friends, and integrating into the community.”<sup>13</sup>

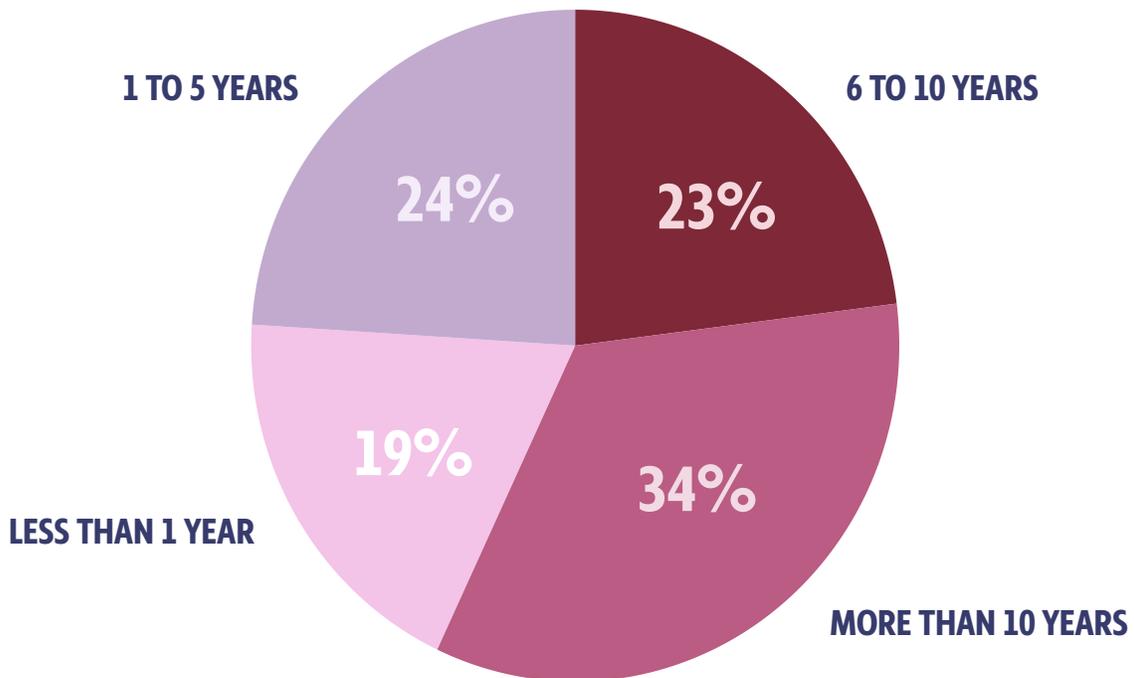
A majority of the people interviewed had planned their life projects to happen in the United States, however, overnight, their hopes, aspirations, jobs, and relationships were disrupted by the implementation of an unjust and cruel policy.

57% of interviewees said they had lived in the United States for more than six years, and 34% had lived there for over a decade, with their families, a stable job, and a sense of belonging within their communities. All of this was swept away in the blink of an eye.

<sup>12</sup>I/A Court H.R. The case of Loayza Tamayo Vs. Peru. Reparations and Costs. Judgment of November 27, 1998. Series C No. 42, paras. 147 and 148.

<sup>13</sup> Individual interviewed in Costa Rica whose identity is protected for security reasons.

### TIME SPENT LIVING IN THE U.S.





Paso Canoas, Costa Rica. Credit: Rodrigo Henríquez / AFSC.

*I don't consider myself a migrant. I left here 18 years ago, when I was 17. I have a U.S. citizen wife and a child born there. I consider myself just another American citizen, but ICE's treatment made me change my mind and decide it was better to stay in Guatemala."*

*Pedro (pseudonym), guatemalan, detained and deported by U.S. authorities.  
Interview conducted in Guatemala.*

Evidently, the disruption of life projects has consequences not only at the financial level but also for family life. Of the total number of people interviewed, 54 indicated that their detention and deportation resulted in the separation of their families. These families are now separated and emotionally affected.

*I emigrated in 2006 and lived in the United States for 20 years. I decided to return on February 10, 2025, leaving 3 sons behind. I chose to return out of fear of being detained."*

*Teresa (pseudonym), 60 years old, forced to return. Interview conducted in El Salvador.*

These persons, whose life projects have been severely disrupted, now face a new reality and multiple unmet needs. Without a family, without income, and without roots, starting over appears to be an almost impossible task.

*...You know, the sadness I carry from not seeing my little daughter, who is only two years old. My son is four, and he still hasn't started school because I haven't had the chance to buy him a pair of shoes. I came here to get ahead, and all I've found is misfortune... I could lose my family because of this... (I feel) anger about it, about the journey... and I feel so bad."*

*Alexander (pseudonym), Venezuelan experiencing reverse migration in Costa Rica.*

*"All I want is (to be back) in my country... I want to be with my family again, because here you live as if you're depressed, constantly thinking about how my children are doing..."*

*Luis (pseudonym), Venezuelan on a reverse migration journey in Costa Rica.*

## IMMOBILITY AND RETURN: CONSEQUENCES IMPOSED BY INHUMANE POLICIES

The externalization of migration and border policies has also given way to other forms of movement: some people decide to return to their countries of origin, while others remain in transit countries due to the impossibility of returning. The latter are considered “stranded”, while the former now travel from north to south (reverse migration). These situations are not the result of free choice but are instead forced by the cruelty of these policies and out of fear of being subjected to further human rights violations.

The documentation shows that 33% of those being interviewed are stranded migrants or in situation of forced return. The great majority come from Cuba, Venezuela, Haiti, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Fewer respondents are from Nicaragua, Colombia, and Peru. Only one person from Ghana and one stateless person were interviewed. Of the 123 people who reported being on a reverse migration journey or stranded, 16 were children and adolescents. Furthermore, 37% of this group requested asylum, mainly in southern Mexico.

*...I arrived with my mother and my two children... we spent about seven months there in Mexico, and then, when... the border was closed, my sister came down from Mexico City, and we all started heading south...”*

*Yolimar (pseudonym), Venezuelan, 29 years old, in Paso Canoas, Costa Rica, on a reverse migration journey with her mother, sister, partner and two children, after living in Tapachula, México.*

Many of these individuals return without a clear destination, moving from one country to another in search of better opportunities or, at the very least, places where they might face less violence. This situation becomes even more complex given that 48% of the people interviewed stated they were traveling with their families, including children and adolescents, who experience this journey in distinct and particularly vulnerable ways.





Migrant people eat at a community diner organized by “Red Uniendo Fronteras” in Paso Canoas, Costa Rica. Credit: Rodrigo Henríquez/ AFSC.

*“...we left because we wanted to reach the United States, and we got on the train (in Mexico). Without meaning to, my dad let go of me and I fell really hard onto the tracks. I hurt my rib... Then Migration caught us... we were hiding the bushes and they caught us... I (made) a friend in Mexico, another one in Guatemala, and I made many other friends in Costa Rica who were from Venezuela, but I lost them when we left San José. We’re going back to Colombia. (The school in San José) was very nice, very big... lots of good friends... but some were mean to me... I used to tell the teacher about it.”*

*Omar (pseudonym), Venezuelan boy, 9 years old, in Paso Canoas, Costa Rica, on a reverse migration journey with his father.*

45% of people in situation of strandedness or forced return pointed out that the primary reasons for leaving their countries of origin were related to different forms of violence, including threats from gangs and organized crime, generalized violence, gender-based violence, human trafficking and sexual exploitation, as well as fear of reprisals for expressing their political views in their home countries. Another 30% mentioned economic and employment-related reasons, along with the need to access health care and education, and to reunite with their families.

Difficulties in accessing asylum along with the shutdown and suspension of these mechanisms, forced migrants either to return to their countries of origin or to seek a new place to live. During the documentation process, 7 cases were recorded of people who decided to undertake the journey from north to south after their asylum appointments in the United States were canceled due to the suspension of the CBP One program, announced by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) on January 21, 2025.<sup>14</sup> The program had enabled people to wait at U.S. ports of entry to present their cases and, in many instances, to enter the country with temporary authorization.

*“...I turned myself in (to U.S. immigration authorities), and they sent me back to Villahermosa... I went back up to Juarez, where I stayed for a while, and we had the possibility of registering through an app called CBP One. I got an appointment for 2024... and I lost it because one person failed to complete the facial recognition. That’s when I decided to return to my country and went to the IOM office in Juarez for voluntary return... but they wouldn’t allow the return because there were problems with the elections in Venezuela... I had to stay in Juárez... and then I started my journey towards the south.”*

*Victor (pseudonym), Venezuelan on reverse migration journey. Paso Canoas, Costa Rica.*

<sup>14</sup>U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Announcement of January 21, 2025, available at: <https://www.cbp.gov/document/guides/cbp-one-gu-de-referencia-r-pida-para-viajeros-que-aceptan-citas-espa-ol> (consulted on: December 17, 2025).

## WEAKENED PROTECTION SYSTEMS IN SPITE OF REAL NEEDS

The international system for the protection of people at risk of persecution has been in place since 1951, when the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was adopted. In that instrument, States recognized that “all human beings, without distinction, should enjoy fundamental rights and freedoms.”<sup>15</sup> This international consensus, now adopted by 149 States, is being eroded, and in some cases made ineffective by policies that externalize migration governance.

*“We went through the COMAR process [Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR)], but we never received the email either... We also went and signed up for the humanitarian flights back in February, and they never called us... You could say we reached a point of desperation...”*

*Yesenia (pseudonym). A 24-year-old Venezuelan woman is experiencing reverse migration in Paso Canoas, Costa Rica, with her 7- and 4-year-old daughters.*

The U.S. government has adopted a series of decisions to restrict access to international protection without any justification. For instance, on December 2, 2025, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) announced the suspension of asylum and refugee processing for people of 19 nationalities.<sup>16</sup> This decision adds to the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) cancellation of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Nicaragua,<sup>17</sup> Honduras<sup>18</sup> and Haiti,<sup>19</sup> as well as the termination of family reunification programs for people from Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, and Honduras.<sup>20</sup>

The shutdown or suspension of mechanisms for accessing asylum and refugee protection, and other forms of protection, in turn gives rise to a practice of migration externalization, as it shifts the obligation to provide protection onto third countries. Moreover, threats of detention and deportation are used as a coercive mechanism to pressure people into abandoning their asylum claims, thereby violating their right to due process and to international protection.

<sup>15</sup> Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, adopted on July 28, 1951, Preamble, United Nations, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-relating-status-refugees> (consulted on: December 17, 2025).

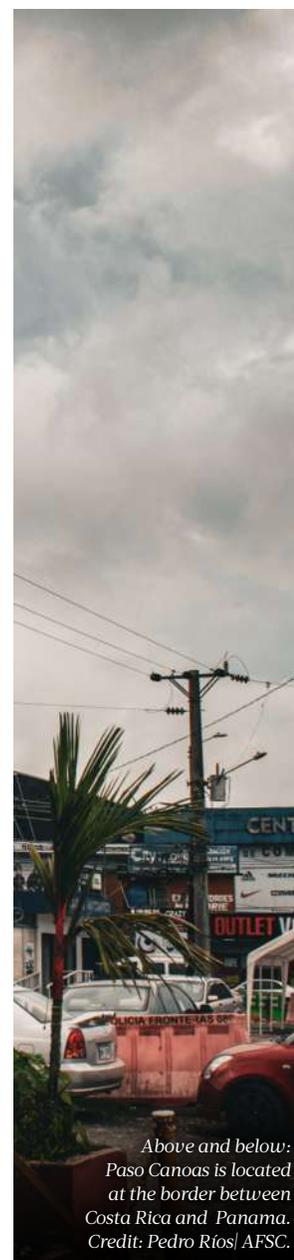
<sup>16</sup> Human Rights Watch, “U.S.: Processing Freeze Scapegoats Immigrants, Asylum Seekers”, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/12/04/us-processing-freeze-scapegoats-immigrants-asylum-seekers> (consulted on: December 17, 2025)

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Press Release of July 7, 2025, available at: <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2025/07/07/dhs-terminates-tps-nicaragua-it-was-never-meant-last-25-years>, (consulted on: December 17, 2025).

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Press Release of September 8, 2025, available at: <https://www.uscis.gov/save/current-user-agencies/news-alerts/secretary-of-homeland-security-announces-termination-of-temporary-protected-status-for-honduras-eads> (consulted on: December 17, 2025).

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Alert of November 26, 2025, available at: <https://www.uscis.gov/newsroom/alerts/dhs-terminates-temporary-protected-status-for-haiti> (consulted on: December 17, 2025).

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Alert of December 12, 2025, available at: <https://www.uscis.gov/newsroom/alerts/dhs-ends-the-abuse-of-the-humanitarian-parole-process-and-terminates-family-reunification-parole> (consulted on December 17, 2025)



*Above and below:  
Paso Canoas is located  
at the border between  
Costa Rica and Panama.  
Credit: Pedro Ríos| AFSC.*

*“My family and I were sent a letter telling us that we had to leave the United States... even though we were going to court following up on our asylum process, but when I saw in the news that immigration authorities were detaining people inside the courts... I became afraid that they would take my children away and deport me alone, with my wife pregnant... With the letter we were given, we were able to leave the United States, and in Mexico we requested voluntary return with the IOM.”*

*Honduran family experiencing forced return. Interview conducted in Tijuana.*

In February 2025, a total of 200 people were deported from the United States to Costa Rica. All of them came from other continents, and they did not even speak Spanish. The majority stated that they were in need of international protection. However, they were denied the opportunity to appear before any authority to present their cases in the United States.

Testimonies collected indicate that these individuals were detained immediately upon entering the United States, placed in handcuffs, deprived of their liberty under inhumane conditions, and afterwards expelled without any explanation. Upon arriving in Costa Rica, they were not even aware that this country existed and were later detained for 60 days without justification.<sup>21</sup> Once in Costa Rica, some opted for the voluntary return program coordinated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM); however, there is no publicly available information on how many of these persons required international protection and did not receive it in a timely manner.

*“After waiting in Mexico and obtaining an appointment through CBP One, we decided to enter the United States in January to seek asylum. I was traveling with my five-year-old son and my fifteen-year-old daughter. My husband and my thirteen-year-old son are in the United States and are asylum seekers. My family is a victim of persecution in Russia, and we cannot return there. When we entered the United States, we were detained for 32 days. We were kept in handcuffs, without seeing sunlight, in a small space. There were about 35 people, and 15 of them were children. We were not allowed to bathe or brush our teeth. Then we were taken to Arizona and from there to Costa Rica. I did not want to come, and they told me they would drag me onto the plane, so I did not resist. We were very afraid. We cannot apply for asylum in Costa Rica. We do not know the language or the culture. We want to be with my husband and my other son. We need help.”*

*Russian family deported to Costa Rica. Interview conducted at the Temporary Migrant Assistance Center (CATEM).*

In light of this situation, in June 2025 the Constitutional Chamber of Costa Rica partially granted a writ of habeas corpus and ordered Costa Rican migration authorities to release these persons, determine their migration status, guarantee access to social rights such as health care, housing, and education, and provide compensation for the damages suffered.<sup>22</sup> However, as of this date (December 2025), these individuals have not received health care assistance, nor have they been able to access adequate housing,

<sup>21</sup> American Friends Service Committee, Center for Justice and International Law, Jesuit Service for Migrants of Costa Rica, “Findings Report: visit of civil society organizations at CATEM-EMISUR”, 2025, available only in Spanish at: <https://cejilmovilidadenmesoamerica.org/herramientas/informe-de-hallazgos-visita-de-organizaciones-de-sociedad-civil-al-catem-emisur/> (consulted on: December 17, 2025).

<sup>22</sup> Constitutional Chamber of Costa Rica, Press Release of June 24, 2025, available only in Spanish at: <https://salaconstitucional.poder-judicial.go.cr/index.php/sala-de-prensa/comunicados/sala-constitucional-protecte-derechos-fundamentales-de-personas-migrantes-deportadas-a-costa-rica> (consulted on: December 17, 2025).

lack valid identity documents, and have not been able to access banking services or formal employment.<sup>23</sup> Some families have even decided to migrate again toward the north and are currently once more in detention by U.S. authorities.

In the case of Mexico, beyond externalization policies, the weakening of the national protection system also stems from COMAR's lack of resources and the sharp rise in asylum applications, which have pushed the institution far beyond its capacity.<sup>24</sup>

All in all, another direct consequence of border externalization policies is the weakening or even the undermining of the international protection system, and therefore the abandonment faced by millions of people whose lives are at risk. These individuals need refuge and, above all, to be acknowledged again as human beings entitled to dignity and rights.

<sup>23</sup> American Friends Service Committee and Jesuit Service for Migrants in Costa Rica, Press Release of November 20, 2025, available only in Spanish at: <https://afsc.org/newsroom/sentencia-de-la-sala-constitucional-de-costa-rica-recibe-reconocimiento-internacional> (consulted on: December 17, 2025).

<sup>24</sup> Animal Político. "Dijeron que nosotros nos organizáramos: migrantes enfrentan largas filas en una Comar desbordada por falta de personal" [They told us to organize ourselves," migrants face long lines at an overloaded COMAR lacking staff]. January 25, 2025. Available only in Spanish at: <https://animalpolitico.com/sociedad/migrantes-refugio-citas-comar-falta-personal>



*Humanitarian assistance for returned Guatemalan women in Casa Violeta, Tecún Umán, border between Guatemala and Mexico. Credit: Casa Violeta*

## EMERGING NEEDS

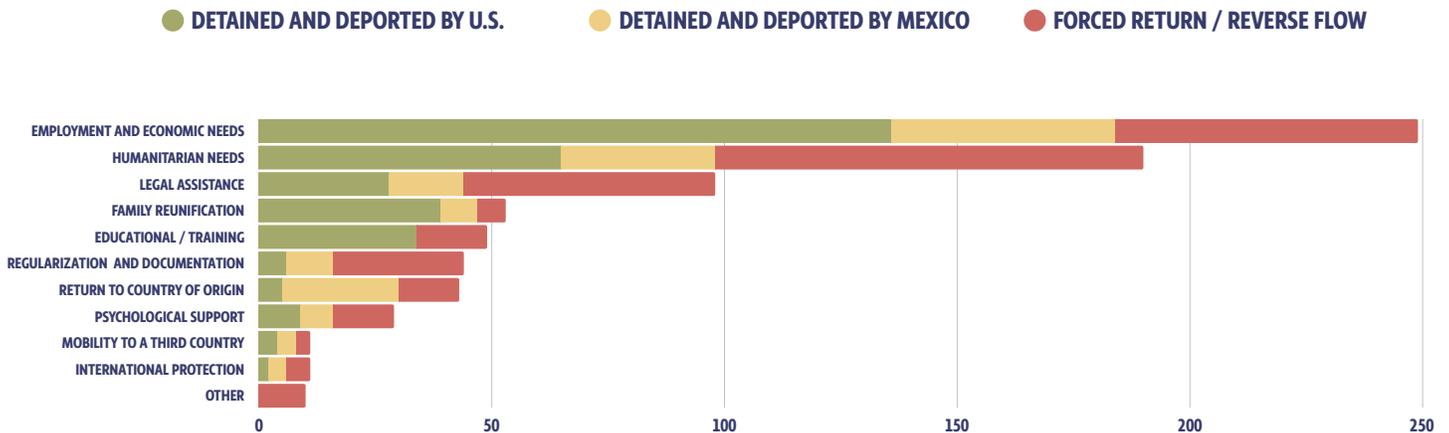
It became clear during interviews that the most urgent need among participants is to find a job and secure an income that allows them to rebuild their lives and cope with daily challenges. This was the most frequently mentioned need across all three groups identified: 82% of those deported from the United States, 67% of those deported from Mexico, and 53% of those stranded or experiencing reverse migration. This is hardly surprising, given that other basic needs, such as food, clothing, housing, and education, depend on having a stable and dignified source of income.

The second most frequently mentioned need relates to humanitarian assistance and shows that, without access to employment, migrants become dependent on external actors to help them meet basic needs such as food and housing. This is particularly concerning given that funding for this kind of assistance has dropped considerably across the region, leaving fewer resources available to support the migrant population.

25% of all respondents mentioned the need for comprehensive legal and administrative assistance, which includes legal accompaniment, guidance on how to recover their belongings, claim their pensions, process their documents, and regulate their migration status. It is noteworthy that this need was most frequently mentioned by people in reverse and/or stranded migration flows, which may be linked to limited information about the possibilities of settling in certain countries, accessing rights, or navigating the protection system.

Regarding family reunification, the group that referred to this need most frequently consisted of people deported from the United States, who accounted for 23% of such mentions. Considering the cases that require guidance to recover belongings left in the United States or to process pension claims in that country, this once again sheds light on the forced separation these families have gone through and the impact it has had on their life projects.

## NEEDS FOR PROTECTION AND ACCESS TO RIGHTS



Other types of needs were also mentioned, including access to education, regularization (especially for stranded or reversed migration flow migrants), return to the country of origin, psychological support, resettlement in a third country, and access to asylum.

As the findings show, the needs are many and varied, some more acute than others depending on people's circumstances and the country in which they are now located. These needs should serve as the basis for designing public policies that enable a dignified return. Numerous civil society organizations make significant efforts to fill the gaps left by state responses, however, this is not enough, and States must develop and implement policies that place the experiences of these individuals at the center. Not only because international obligations require it but, above all, because it is a matter of humanity.

# Conclusions

1. **CURRENT MIGRATION-GOVERNANCE POLICIES** in the region, are grounded in a national security approach, institutionalize cruelty, dehumanize people, reproduce and legitimize racism, and result in the systematic violation of rights.
2. As this report shows, **BORDER EXTERNALIZATION PRACTICES** embedded in these policies exacerbate the preexisting vulnerabilities of migrants and people in need of international protection. Arbitrary detention, collective expulsions, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, and racial discrimination constitute violations of the non-derogable principle of non-refoulement, and of the rights to due process, to life and personal integrity, and to the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights.
3. The documented facts reveal a web of **COMPLICITY AMONG STATES** that institutionalizes a chain of rights violations against people on the move. Sustained by dehumanizing narratives, it has become normalized for migrants to be forced to move from one country to another, facing discrimination and violence, as well as linguistic, cultural, and legal barriers, without any guarantee of their rights. This shared responsibility not only contravenes the obligations of States to ensure international protection but also perpetuates structural conditions of injustice and impunity.
4. **THE CONSEQUENCES OF THESE POLICIES** are an affront to our humanity: they lead to family separation and uprooting, inflict deep wounds at the personal (physical and emotional), family, and community levels, and break bonds and weaken support networks, leaving lasting scars that undermine the possibilities for migrants to rebuild their life projects.
5. **CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS** play a fundamental role in providing assistance to migrants and deported individuals. This work takes place amid significant challenges, including stigmatization, a reduction of international cooperation funds, and government-imposed restrictions on entering immigration detention centers to provide support and carry out social oversight.
6. In response to dehumanizing policies, people on the move, civil society organizations, and social movements continue to resist and will keep fighting for **MIGRATION JUSTICE** through collective actions that place people at the center as subjects of rights and dignity.

# Calls to Action

## TO THE STATES:

1. **END ALL PRACTICES OF MIGRATION GOVERNANCE EXTERNALIZATION**, as well as national security-based approaches and narratives that criminalize and stigmatize migrants.
2. **COMPLY WITH INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS OBLIGATIONS** by guaranteeing protection and access to justice for migrants, returnees, and people in need of international protection, and by ensuring accountability for human rights violations stemming from the externalization practices that have been implemented.
3. **INCREASE THE ALLOCATION OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES** to address the needs of people on the move and strengthen migration governance systems that are centered on their rights and wellbeing.
4. **ENGAGE IN COLLECTIVE WORK** – including the participation of civil society – to tackle the root causes of forced migration and to develop inclusive and humane policies that prioritize the voices, dignity, and human rights of migrants.

## TO HUMAN RIGHTS MONITORING BODIES:

5. **RAISE EFFORTS** within their mandates, and in a coordinated manner, to denounce discriminatory migration policies and use all tools at their disposal to document, expose, and sanction the externalization of migration governance and the practices of racism and discrimination it entails.

## TO CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS:

6. **STRENGTHEN COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION** among organizations, crossborder networks, and other social actors, such as academia, to combine resources and reinforce documentation and collective action aimed at recording impacts and denouncing unjust policies, thereby continuing to contribute to transforming narratives that criminalize migrant populations.



*Paso Canoas Park, Costa Rica's southern border. Credit: Rodrigo Henríquez/ AFSC.*

## TO SOCIETY IN GENERAL:

**7. RECOGNIZE THE INHERENT DIGNITY OF ALL HUMAN BEINGS** and the specific need for protection of people on the move. Expose the economic, social, and cultural contributions, as well as the benefits that migrants and refugees bring to our communities.

**8. RAISE OUR VOICES** and use our platforms to denounce that policies rooted in discrimination and cruelty affect not only those who directly endure them but also our communities and our shared humanity.

**9. RECONNECT WITH THE EMPATHY AND SOLIDARITY** that define us as human, reject stigmatization, and contribute to building a more just, inclusive, and violence free world.

States will not change their policies unless citizens demand it. This is why the call is to inform ourselves, to question narratives that criminalize migrants, to recognize the contributions of migrants to our communities, and to reclaim solidarity as a shared foundational principle. It is about seeing migrants for who they are: people with rights, and demanding real conditions for equal and harmonious coexistence.

Those who hold power (whether institutional, political, economic, or social) can no longer postpone fulfilling their responsibility. Using that power to protect migrants in situations of vulnerability is not optional, it is an ethical obligation. The path currently being promoted is unsustainable and generates preventable forms of violence. In the face of this, no action is too small and no space is irrelevant. Every action matters.



*Paso Canoas Park, Costa Rica's southern border. Credit: Rodrigo Henríquez/ AFSC.*



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