



CONVOCATION:

# A Vision for a Stronger U.S.-Mexico Partnership



U.S.-MEXICO  
FOUNDATION



JULY 2020



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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

### **Our gratitude to:**

Roger and Mary Wallace  
The Coppel Family

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January 2020, the U.S.-Mexico Foundation and the Wilson Center's Mexico Institute brought together 6 former U.S. ambassadors to Mexico and 6 former Mexican ambassadors to the United States to discuss the bilateral relationship. The ambassadors engaged in an intensive and strategic dialogue concerning the future of U.S.-Mexico relations in critical areas, including economic competitiveness, public security, migration and borders. The participants also discussed the importance of cultural issues, public opinion and soft power to the bilateral relationship.

The discussions generated the following key findings and recommendations for the future of U.S.-Mexico relations:

- **Strong institutions** support stability and progress in the U.S.-Mexico relationship by maintaining the focus of high-level officials and helping to build cross-border relationships. Officials should restart the bilateral economic dialogue and potentially expand it to include issues of security and migration. A bilateral cabinet meeting could serve as an opportunity to initiate a new period of cross-border collaboration.
- At both national and local levels, the United States and Mexico **must work to sustain public support** for positive bilateral relations. People-to-people connections, especially through student and research exchanges, are critical to fostering mutual interest and understanding among U.S. and Mexican citizens.
- The United States and Mexico should develop **a bilateral, coordinated economic strategy** that is forward looking. This economic agenda must extend beyond trade issues to include inclusive regional growth, workforce development, and infrastructure investment to facilitate trade and travel.
- The United States and Mexico should establish a framework for **a modernized security and intelligence-sharing relationship** between the two countries that emphasizes shared responsibility in confronting transnational security and rule of law challenges. A comprehensive and dynamic strategy is needed to build institutional capacity and direct it quickly to developing issues, such as fentanyl trafficking.
- The two countries should work together at the federal and subnational levels on issues of **border management**. Innovative programs, such as joint inspection of cargo by U.S. and Mexican officials, can simultaneously improve border security and efficiency.
- The dynamics of regional migration have changed dramatically over the past decade, with Central Americans and recently extra-continental migrants growing in importance. The United States and Mexico should develop **a bilateral migration framework** that, to the extent possible, takes migration out of the political realm and makes it an issue of technical management. It should facilitate legal migration and modernize border management while prioritizing the humane treatment of migrants and refugees.



*Grounded in Three Decades of Experience as Ambassadors in Washington and Mexico City*

## **CONVOCATION: A VISION FOR A STRONGER U.S.-MEXICO PARTNERSHIP**

In January 2020, in Blanco, Texas, the U.S.-Mexico Foundation and the Wilson Center's Mexico Institute brought together 6 former U.S. ambassadors to Mexico and 6 former Mexican ambassadors to the United States to discuss the bilateral relationship in a meeting titled Convocation 1.0. Leveraging decades of diplomatic, policy and private sector experience, this convocation of American and Mexican "Eagles" engaged in an intensive and strategic dialogue on the issues of economic competitiveness, public security, migration and borders. Furthermore, the participants in the dialogue discussed the importance of cultural issues, public opinion and soft power.

The timing of the convocation and of this report is critical. With the successful ratification of the USMCA in all three North American nations, attention can now turn to the long-term resilience and health of the bilateral relationship, focusing on the opportunities and challenges that are shared across the U.S.-Mexico border. In all of the issues discussed by the ambassadors, a recurring theme was that of a shared destiny and shared responsibility between the two nations and their governments. As each and every former diplomat emphasized, Mexico and the United States are converging more and are more interdependent than ever, and what occurs in one country impacts directly on the day-to-day life of citizens in the other.

The subsequent emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of Mexico and the United States, as well as Canada, cooperating and collaborating to counter such global threats. The potential value of North America's production and commercial chains is only highlighted by the pandemic, as well as the oil market turmoil that simultaneously struck. The interdependence of production processes, markets, and investments, along with the deep social integration between Mexico and the United States, have been severely tested by the onset of the crisis, by decision-making on both sides of the border and will require, in the short-, medium- and long-terms, a coordinated response between them and across the continent.

As this report will highlight, one of the most important take-aways from the ambassadorial dialogue was that institutions and processes matter. Existing institutions concerning trade, security, and migration need to be strengthened, reinvigorated and brought up to date, and there is an urgent need to think of extending the institutional approach into other areas hitherto unaddressed. The ambassadors recognized the challenges of building durable, resilient yet agile institutions and mechanisms, but stressed that their presence greatly facilitates long-term cooperation.

Convocation 1.0 marks the beginning of an ongoing dialogue between the ambassadors, as well as other stakeholders and former officials who are deeply invested in the bilateral relationship. The U.S.-Mexico Foundation and the Mexico Institute are deeply grateful to the Eagles for this leadership, dedication, and commitment to bringing about a brighter future for the relationship between our two nations.



## Building a Stable Partnership for a Turbulent World

The modern era of U.S.-Mexico relations—characterized by deep cooperation on economic competitiveness; public and national security; and myriad other issues—was born amid the tumult of the movement for democratization in Mexico and a geopolitical realignment caused by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. During this era, Mexico pursued an agenda of economic liberalization and political opening, engaging with the world more broadly and opening to the U.S. specifically through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Leaders in the United States and Mexico saw Europe uniting, old dividing lines crumbling, and identified an opportunity to strengthen the bonds of friendship and trade across North America to ensure the strength of our region as the world transformed. Additionally, many Mexican leaders studied in the United States, further entrenching the relationship between the two countries. The framework for partnership was stressed and forced to adapt in response to economic crises and especially in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 2001, but in each case the United States and Mexico decided to carefully avoid division and instead double down on the ability of cooperation and institution-building to overcome these challenges.

Now, some three decades after Presidents Carlos Salinas and George H.W. Bush began negotiations for what would become NAFTA, the agreement has been updated and revised, recommitting the three countries of North America to a deep economic partnership. The passage of the USMCA opens a space to reinvigorate and institutionalize an economic dialogue that includes, but goes well beyond, trade to promote innovation and entrepreneurship; student and research exchange; a workforce development agenda to ensure North American workers are prepared for the future of work; and a region-wide effort to promote inclusive economic growth and poverty alleviation.

Additionally, the rise of tensions between the United States and China over the terms of its integration into the international system are once again raising important questions about the global context for regional relations within North America. The partial decoupling of China from the North American economy will bring both challenges and opportunities, each of which are best faced with the United States, Mexico and Canada united and working together as a region. The recent passage of the USMCA restores much needed certainty to the region and provides a firm footing for a coordinated approach to China and other global challenges. This is especially important since the pandemic has highlighted the need to have resilient, secure and competitive supply chains, which may be served by reshoring and focusing on the platform for North American regional production.

Considering the context, this report develops specific recommendations in each of the three traditional pillars of U.S.-Mexico relations: trade and competitiveness; security and the rule of law; and migration. Two additional topics, the need for sustained efforts to develop and consolidate public support for bilateral partnership and the importance of building strong and dynamic institutions to coordinate across government agencies and to sustain high-level leadership in bilateral relations, are addressed in the final portion of this report.

## Trade & Competitiveness: A More Competitive and Inclusive Region

The relationship between the United States and Mexico is characterized by both shared opportunity and shared responsibility in critical areas – economically, politically, and socially. Trade in particular remains a crucial driver of the U.S.-Mexico relationship. NAFTA established and now the USMCA has consolidated a foundation upon which to grow the enormous economic potential of the North American continent.

NAFTA allowed the United States and Mexico to shape a shared destiny through deepened economic integration. Since the implementation of the NAFTA in 1994, trade between the United States and Mexico has grown more than seven-fold.<sup>1</sup> The United States is Mexico's largest trade partner and, as of 2019, Mexico has become the United States' top trade partner as well.<sup>2</sup> The accumulated level of foreign direct investment in both directions across the border has grown more than six-fold since NAFTA's implementation as well.<sup>3</sup>

The 2019 U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) updates NAFTA to reflect modern economic concerns and challenges, including the technological and digital transformation of the economy, worker protections, and environmental regulations. Yet, as a trade agreement, the USMCA still leaves certain aspects of the U.S.-Mexico economic relationship unaddressed. Now, with a strong trade relationship established and cemented with the USMCA, the United States and Mexico have a new opportunity to develop a wide range of economic initiatives designed to spur inclusive and sustainable growth, increase cross-border investment, and strengthen the competitiveness of the region.

1. "Trade in Goods with Mexico," United States Census Bureau, Last Modified January 31, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c2010.html>

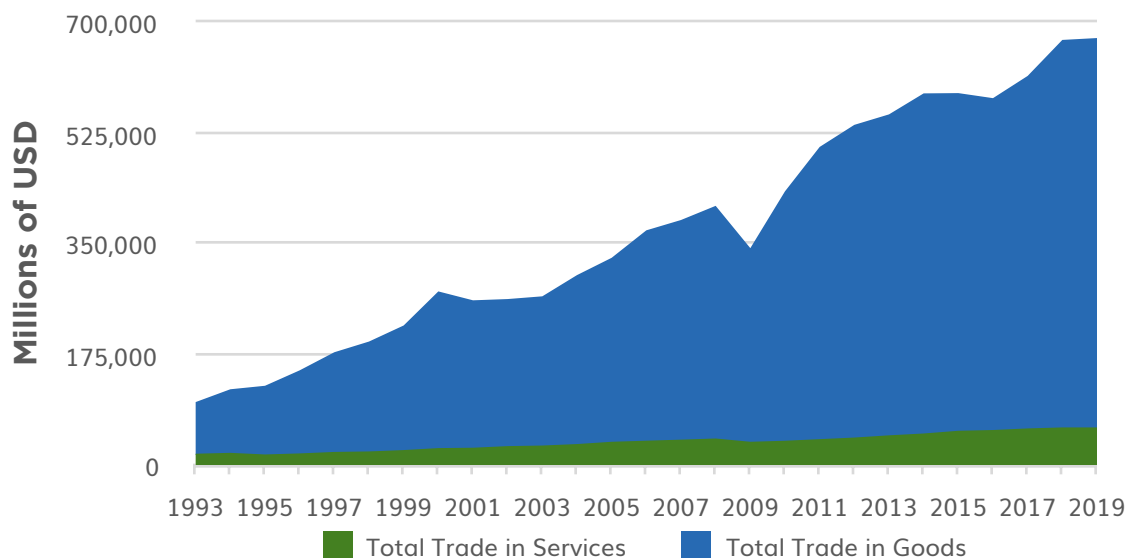
2. Mexico is the United States' top partner in terms of trade in goods. 2019 figures are not yet available for services trade, but Canada is likely the United States' top trade partner when goods and services are both included. China has fallen to become the United States' third largest trading partner from its position on top.

"Trade in Goods with Canada," United States Census Bureau, Last Modified January 31, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c1220.html>.

3. Villarreal, M. Angeles, "U.S.-Mexico Economic Relations: Trends, Issues, and Implications," Congressional Research Service, Last Modified March 26, 2019, 5, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL32934.pdf>.



## U.S.-Mexico Trade in Goods and Services, 1993-2019



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau (for trade in goods) and OECD (for trade in services).<sup>4</sup>

In both the short and long term, the United States and Mexico must work to promote a more inclusive and equal economic development across the two countries to ensure a prosperous and competitive North America.

### Moving Forward:

The United States and Mexico should create a post-USMCA bilateral economic agenda that is forward looking. To capitalize on shared opportunities and address economic challenges, the United States and Mexico should develop a bilateral, coordinated economic strategy that extends beyond trade issues to include inclusive regional development, labor retraining, economic institution building, and technology-driven transformations underway in workplaces.

In particular, the United States and Mexico should focus on furthering economic integration in four critical areas: workforce mobility and development; sustainable development at the border; infrastructure investment along trade corridors; and institution-building and the development of a joint economic strategy. Implementation of the following recommendations will require significant soft power projection on both sides of the border to convince the general public of the benefits of further cross-border economic integration. This joint economic strategy should be led and institutionalized through a revitalization of high-level economic dialogues and regular joint economic cabinet meetings.

<sup>4</sup> Data for Trade in Goods: "Trade in Goods with Mexico," United States Census Bureau, Last Modified January 31, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c2010.html>.

Data for Trade in Services 1999-2019: "EBOPS 2010 - Trade in services by partner economy," Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Accessed March 25, 2020, [https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TISP\\_EBOPS2010](https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TISP_EBOPS2010).

Data for Trade in Services 1993-1998: "EBOPS 2002 - Trade in services by partner country," Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Accessed March 30, 2020, [https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TISP\\_EBOPS2010](https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TISP_EBOPS2010).

The adoption of greater technology to improve workplace productivity has and will continue to disrupt labor markets and potentially deepen inequality in the United States and Mexico. The two countries must be prepared to address challenges concerning the future of work and the reskilling of their respective workforces. The two countries should establish a dialogue and series of joint initiatives on workforce development.<sup>5</sup> They should also renew discussions on politically feasible labor mobility programs, such as temporary worker programs, to better match labor supply and demand across the region.

Critically for the U.S.-Mexico relationship, climate change is manifesting at the border in the form of water shortages. As such, the U.S. and Mexico should prioritize sustainable development at the border and the groundbreaking work achieved in 2012 on the Colorado River and the joint stewardship and collaboration on that critically important river basin. The two countries should commit to a sustainable development framework, including cross-border water management systems, in all discussions pertaining to economic development.

Infrastructure investment along trade corridors is essential to ensure economic competitiveness. The United States and Mexico should capitalize on the focus of both President Trump and President López Obrador on infrastructure and invest in updated infrastructure along U.S.-Mexico trade corridors to facilitate commerce. A commitment to deepening cross-border economic integration beyond the USMCA will also require investment in border management technology and strategy. This also encompasses future-oriented digital infrastructure linking the North American economies.

Finally, while our economies are linked and NAFTA and the USMCA facilitate trade, the United States and Mexico lack the institutional frameworks necessary to lead the development and implementation of an integrated economic strategy. The U.S. and Mexico should institutionalize an economic dialogue, whether independently or in the context of a broader binational (or trinational) dialogue, that includes the participation of both the public and private sectors, to draft and regularly reassess an integrated bilateral economic strategy. A coordinated economic strategy between the U.S. and Mexico will also help the two countries respond to the rising influence of China in a way that bolsters regional competitiveness.

<sup>5</sup> Wayne, Earl Anthony, Grecia De La O Abarca, Raquel Chuayfett, and Emma Sarfity, "North America 2.0: A Workforce Development Agenda," Accessed March 25, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/north-america-20-workforce-development-agenda>.

# Security & Rule of Law: Shared Responsibility in Action

If trade and economic relations point to the shared opportunities of a strong U.S.-Mexico relationship, security and rule of law issues remain among the clearest examples of areas in which the two countries have a shared responsibility. The fight against drug trafficking and organized crime is a long-standing, defining aspect of the U.S.-Mexico security relationship. But progress made in terms of fighting crime is undermined without innovative and effective approaches to upholding the rule of law. A continued commitment to furthering security and the rule of law is thus essential to ensuring a stable and productive relationship between the United States and Mexico.

Though the United States and Mexico have developed much deeper security cooperation over the last two decades, the flow of drugs northbound and guns and money southbound continues. Violence is now at record levels in Mexico, and organized crime and drug trafficking organizations have proven resilient. These security issues cannot be addressed by a single country alone; they are transnational, requiring a joint response. The Mérida Initiative, a security cooperation agreement between the United States and Mexico launched in 2008 aimed at fighting drug trafficking, organized crime, and violence, embodies the principle of shared responsibility on security and rule of law issues. However, an updated security agreement in the spirit of the Mérida Initiative is needed to reflect the security landscape of the 2020s.

## **Moving Forward:**

The United States and Mexico must establish a framework for a modernized security and intelligence-sharing relationship between the two countries that emphasizes shared responsibility in confronting transnational security and rule of law challenges. A comprehensive strategy is needed to disrupt criminal activity while building institutional capacity and focused crime prevention programs.

As part of this, the United States and Mexico must focus on the following areas to not only improve security and reduce crime and violence, but also to guarantee justice and rule of law are upheld: mapping the supply chain and business structures of criminal groups on both sides of the border; adapting counternarcotic initiatives and the fight against organized crime to reflect current trends; and building trust in institutions and the rule of law, as well as between law enforcement and justice authorities of both countries.

Though many security threats to the United States and Mexico – such as drug and gun smuggling, organized crime and drug trafficking groups, and corruption – are familiar, new threats alter the overall security landscape. The rise of fentanyl in particular presents a novel challenge to counternarcotic efforts. The United States and Mexico should conduct a joint security assessment of both current and emerging threats and the efficacy of current programs and cooperative mechanisms to determine priorities for the U.S.-Mexico security relationship.



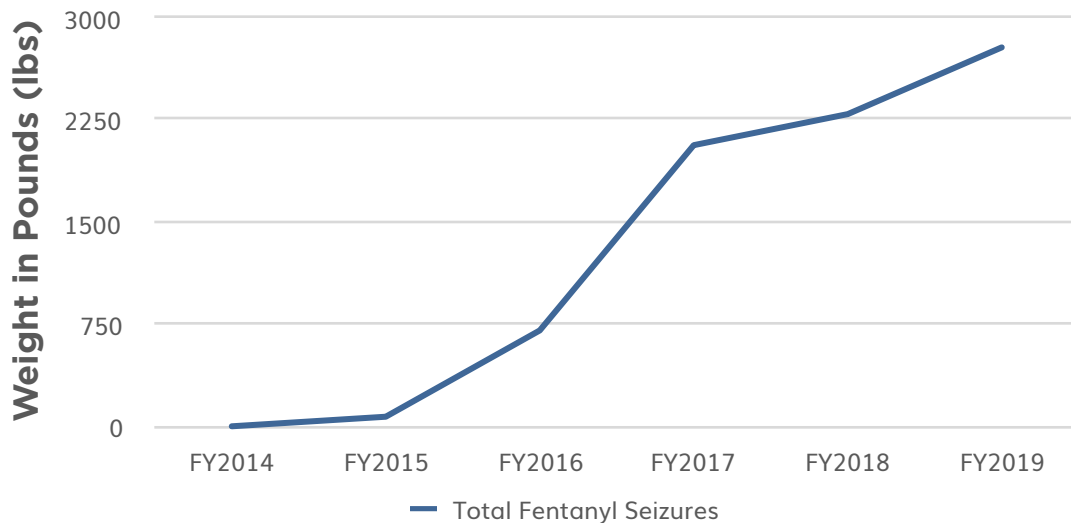
# Border Management

Issues of border management are relevant to each of the three main sections of this report, yet due to their position at the intersection of the topics of economics, security and migration, they do not fit cleanly into any one part. Key to successful border management is the development and promotion of programs that create benefits across multiple policy areas instead of gaining in one at the expense of another.

After the terrorist attacks of 2001, for example, major security enhancements were made, but congestion for people and commerce became much worse. Trusted traveler and shipper programs helped solve the dilemma by allowing border crossers to voluntarily submit to a vetting process that would, once they were deemed low-risk, give them access to an expedited lane to quickly cross the border, a system that enhanced security, mobility and competitiveness simultaneously.

New programs that further improve efficiency and security, such as joint inspection (known as Unified Cargo Processing) and pre-clearance, are being implemented. Much more can be done. For example, new ports of entry should be jointly constructed and managed so that exit and entry is a single, rather than a duplicative, process. More broadly, the border should be reframed so it can be seen less as a place of risk and more one of shared opportunity. To do so, state and local leaders from the border region will need to play a central role. Forums for cooperation, such as the Border Governors Conference and Border Mayors Associations, which have had their ups and downs over the years, should be reactivated and given the support needed to elevate the voice of the border.

## Fentanyl Seizures Nationwide by U.S. Customs and Border Protection Office of Field Operations and U.S. Border Patrol, FY2014-FY2019



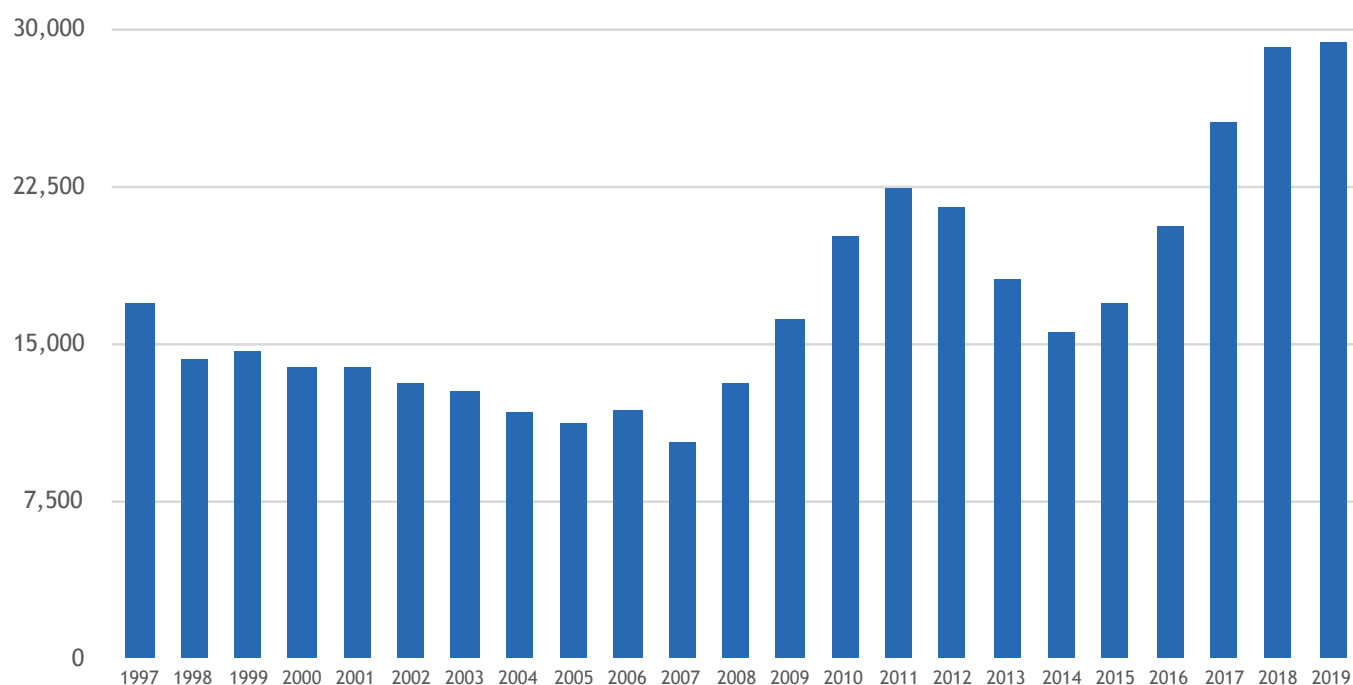
Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection.<sup>6</sup>

While many traditional challenges remain concerning the fight against drug trafficking, the introduction of fentanyl into the drug market poses new challenges and opportunities for U.S. and Mexican law enforcement. The two countries should study the fentanyl trade and supply chain to better understand the points at which it can be stopped. Such an approach achieved some successes in addressing the production of methamphetamine in both the United States and Mexico. Further action is required to understand drug flows and distribution, with emphasis on understanding how drugs reach consumers in the United States. Although disrupting the fentanyl supply chain and distribution network is rightly a current priority, illegal trade of drugs or other goods will continue as long as there is a U.S. market and Mexican supply. The United States and Mexico need to develop a template and further institutionalize modes of cooperation to respond to new types of cross-border illicit activity in the future.

Additionally, organized crime and drug trafficking organizations remain a persistent threat in Mexico. The United States and Mexico can reaffirm the fight against organized crime and drug trafficking organizations by strengthening local and national police and encouraging innovative solutions to counter crime and violence.

<sup>6</sup> "CBP Enforcement Statistics Fiscal Year 2020," U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Accessed March 30, 2020, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/cbp-enforcement-statistics>.

## Number of Registered Intentional Homicides in Mexico, 1997-2019



Source: Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública, Gobierno de México.<sup>7</sup>

Given the historical trend on impunity and corruption, there is limited faith in public institutions in Mexico. Thus, rebuilding trust in public institutions in Mexico is a critical area in which the two countries should collaborate. The U.S. and Mexican governments should demonstrate serious commitment to strengthening Mexican institutions, including law enforcement, the judiciary, and other vital democratic institutions. Key to any success is also strengthening mutual trust between the law enforcement and justice officials of both nations.

Rampant impunity in cases of violence and organized crime also limits the credibility of the Mexican government and the possibility of long-term violence reduction. Mexico should commit to the full implementation of the judicial reform initiated in 2008 to strengthen rule of law in the country, and the United States should continue to offer any support required by Mexico to succeed in this important transformation of its criminal justice system.

<sup>7</sup> National homicide totals per year were taken from the “Incidencia Delictiva del Fuero Común” reports for each year, 1997-2019. Note that the 1997-2017 reports use the old methodology and the 2018-2019 reports use the new methodology.

The “Incidencia Delictiva del Fuero Común” reports from 1997 to 2017 can be found at the following site: “Incidencia delictiva del Fuero Común, metodología anterior,” Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública, Gobierno de México, Last Modified March 20, 2020, <https://www.gob.mx/sesnsp/acciones-y-programas/incidencia-delictiva-del-fuero-comun?idiom=es>.

The “Incidencia Delictiva del Fuero Común” reports for 2018 and 2019 can be found at the following site: “Incidencia delictiva del Fuero Común, nueva metodología,” Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública, Gobierno de México, Last Modified March 20, 2020, <https://www.gob.mx/sesnsp/acciones-y-programas/incidencia-delictiva-del-fuero-comun-nueva-metodologia>.

# Migration: Unresolved Challenges and Untapped Opportunities

With 11 million Mexicans living in the United States and approximately 1.5 million Americans living in Mexico, migration has for decades been one of the defining features of U.S.-Mexico relations. It has created a network of deep social and familial bonds across the border, and today approximately 11 percent of the U.S. population is Mexican or of Mexican descent<sup>8</sup>. While migration itself remains a constant, the nature and composition of migration has changed markedly over the past decade in ways that have created new opportunities for bilateral cooperation.

Since the financial crisis and recession of 2007-2009, more Mexicans have returned to their home country than come to the United States. As a result, the Mexican-born population in the United States declined from 12.8 million in 2007 to 11.2 million in 2017.<sup>9</sup> In 2017, 4.9 million Mexicans in the United States were undocumented immigrants.<sup>10</sup> This decline in Mexican migration was the result of the U.S. recession and also demographic and economic changes in Mexico and U.S. border security measures. However, as Mexican migration declined, a new wave of migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America began. The combination of these two trends meant that by 2014, Mexicans accounted for less than half of those apprehended for unauthorized entry at the U.S.-Mexico border.

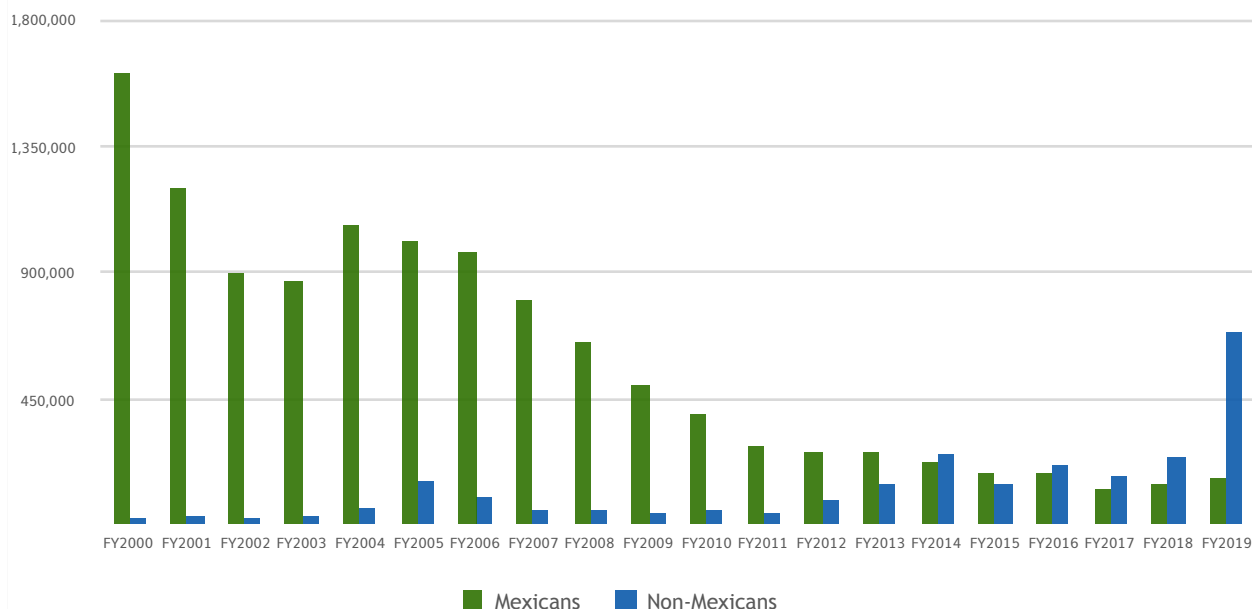


8. Noe-Bustamante, Luis, Antonio Flores, and Sono Shah, "Facts on Hispanics of Mexican Origin in the United States, 2017," Pew Research Center, Last Modified September 16, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/fact-sheet/u-s-hispanics-facts-on-mexican-origin-latinos/>.

9. Gonzales-Barrera, Ana, "More Mexicans Leaving Than Coming to the U.S.," Pew Research Center, Last Modified November 19, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2015/11/19/more-mexicans-leaving-than-coming-to-the-u-s/>.  
Radford, Jynnah, "Key findings about U.S. immigrants," Pew Research Center, Last Modified June 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/17/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/>.

10. Passel, Jeffrey S. and D'Vera Cohn, "Mexicans decline to less than half the U.S. unauthorized immigrant population for the first time," Pew Research Center, Last Modified June 12, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/12/us-unauthorized-immigrant-population-2017/>.

## Apprehensions at the U.S. Southwest Border Mexicans vs. Non-Mexicans



Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection.<sup>11</sup>

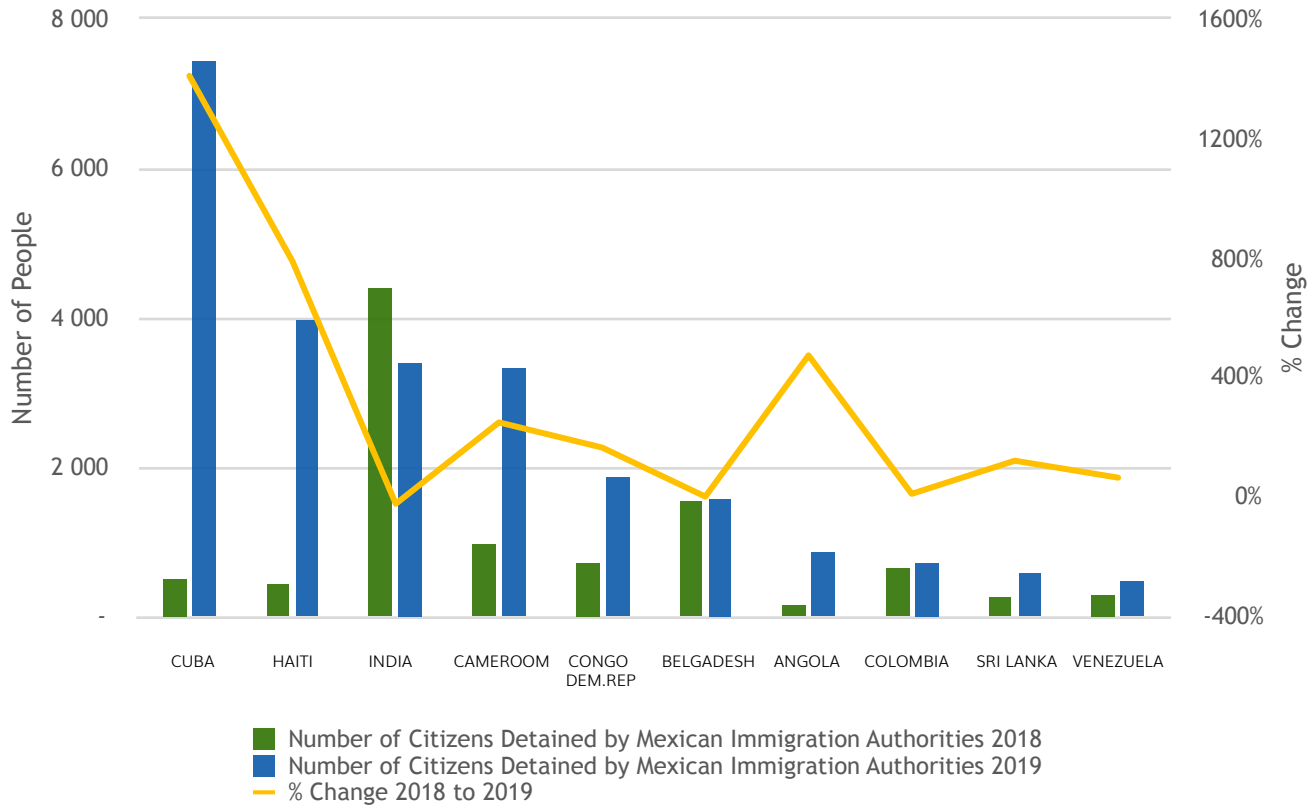
As Central American migration grew, so did calls for Mexico to increase its support in managing migration. Though the climate of bilateral relations has changed across administrations in both countries, there has long been a call for Mexico to improve controls at its southern border. Across administrations, Mexico has made efforts to do so, and Mexico has become a more reliable partner of the United States in controlling illegal migration in recent years. Still, the task is incomplete, and professionalization of Mexico's border management agencies must continue. Though cooperation has increased, the United States and Mexico have yet to find the best or most sustainable framework to address migration. Historical precedent makes clear that bilateral cooperation is preferred to unilateral action. Ultimately, migration is a transnational challenge requiring solutions that embody shared responsibility and reflect the shared opportunity that comes with an integrated framework.

Not only has Mexico become an important transit country for migration, but it is also increasingly a destination country as migrants originally seeking passage to the United States decide to make a home in Mexico. Demographic shifts also include a growing number of families and children, as well as a recent spike in migrants from the Caribbean, Africa and Asia. These changes bring new challenges in terms of protecting vulnerable populations, controlling borders, and shifting the balance of roles and responsibilities of Mexico and the United States in managing the phenomenon.

<sup>11</sup> Data was pulled from tables titled "Illegal Alien Apprehensions From Mexico by Fiscal Year" and "Illegal Alien Apprehensions From Countries Other Than Mexico By Fiscal Year" at the following site: "BP Total Apps Mexico OTM FY2000-FY2019," United States Border Patrol, Accessed March 25, 2020, [https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2020-Jan/U.S.\\_Border\\_Patrol\\_Total\\_Monthly\\_Family\\_Unit\\_Apprehensions\\_by\\_Sector%28FY\\_2013\\_-\\_FY\\_2019%29\\_0.pdf](https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2020-Jan/U.S._Border_Patrol_Total_Monthly_Family_Unit_Apprehensions_by_Sector%28FY_2013_-_FY_2019%29_0.pdf).



## Beyond Central America: Migrants Detained by Mexican Immigration Authorities by Country of Origin, 2018-2019



**\*\*Note:** This chart shows the top-10 countries of origin for foreigners detained by Mexican immigration authorities, excluding Central Americans and North Americans.

Source: Secretaría de Gobernación, Gobierno de México.<sup>12</sup>

The surge in migration from Central America to the U.S.-Mexico border has resulted in increased asylum claims in the United States and also in Mexico, overwhelming both governments' capacities to respond to this influx in migrants and asylum seekers. The resulting migration crisis has been highly politicized on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Nevertheless, the current migration crisis presents opportunities for the United States and Mexico to reevaluate their migration policies and practices, refocus on the root causes of migration, and reaffirm bilateral cooperation.

<sup>12</sup> Data for 2018: "Boletines Estadísticos: III Extranjeros presentados y devueltos, 2018," Cuadro 3.1.1, Gobierno de México, Accessed March 30, 2020, <http://portales.segob.gob.mx/es/PoliticaMigratoria/CuadrosBOLETIN?Anual=2018&Secc=3>.

Data for 2019: "Boletines Estadísticos: III Extranjeros presentados y devueltos, 2019," Cuadro 3.1.1, Gobierno de México, Accessed March 25, 2020, <http://portales.segob.gob.mx/es/PoliticaMigratoria/CuadrosBOLETIN?Anual=2019&Secc=3>.

## **Moving Forward:**

The United States and Mexico should jointly reevaluate migration policies and practices to develop a bilateral migration policy and operations framework that facilitates legal migration and modernizes border management, while prioritizing the humane treatment of migrants and refugees.

Two main questions emerge concerning the opportunities for rethinking bilateral migration frameworks. First, how do we better facilitate legal migration and cross-border movement? Migration issues are highly politicized at the national level, even though much issue-resolution and solution-implementation can occur at the local level. The politicization of migration domestically complicates the fact that, at both local and national levels, significant interagency coordination on both sides of the border is required for successful migration policy implementation.

As such, the United States and Mexico must each work to depoliticize migration at the national level, moving it to the extent possible into the realm of technical management. The two countries should evaluate the expansion of other programs that encourage legal circular migration, such as a binational temporary worker program.

To handle increased asylum claims and larger numbers of migrants in both countries, the United States and Mexico should strengthen their immigration and asylum processes and agencies through significant infrastructure and human capital investment.

Even if the United States and Mexico collaborate to facilitate smoother legal migration, a second question remains: how can the two countries effectively address the root causes of migration? Migrants are often cited as a problem in and of themselves, leaving the root causes of migration unaddressed in local or national policy. Though challenging, the United States and Mexico should jointly evaluate the reasons for migration from Central America to their countries. These collaborative efforts to assess the reasons for migration can help encourage regional solutions to the local issues causing massive outflows of people.

## **Sustaining Public Support**

Despite governmental, economic, and social ties that have deepened over the past three decades, the way in which the U.S. and Mexican publics view one another has experienced several ups and downs. Drug-related violence, high-profile corruption cases, and persistent poverty have greatly affected the perception of Mexico in the United States, providing fuel and staying power for many of the outdated, overly simplistic, and at times simply incorrect perceptions held by many Americans regarding Mexico. The heated campaign rhetoric toward Mexico in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign echoed many of these perceptions, which in turn offended a large segment of the Mexican population and caused a sharp decline in Mexican perceptions of the United States. More generally, Mexican opinion of the United States has varied considerably depending on the president occupying the White House.



## **Moving Forward:**

A broad range of tools ought to be employed to build goodwill and understanding. Strengthening people to people ties is among the most important, and the close geographic distance between the United States and Mexico makes travel very feasible. Attention should be given to expanding student and research exchange between the two countries. Tourism should also be promoted, with a special emphasis on developing more opportunities for real cultural exchange to take place during trips that are principally of a recreational nature. Gastronomy, sports, and the arts are all powerful vehicles of cultural expression and interaction. The joint Mexico-U.S.-Canada 2026 World Cup in particular is a powerful symbol of regional community and should be fully taken advantage of as an opportunity to forge understanding, goodwill, and to devise and conduct joint public diplomacy efforts in each country and both countries towards the rest of the world. Finally, real challenges in both the United States and Mexico must be addressed in order to remove barriers to a more positive image of one another. Corruption and violence taint Mexico's image in the United States, and anti-immigrant sentiment and broader issues of racism do the same to the U.S. image in Mexico. Cogent and convincing national efforts to address such domestic challenges play an important role in changing perception.

## **Institutions and Leadership**

Sustained progress in U.S.-Mexico relations requires strong institutions and mechanisms that produce results. U.S.-Mexico relations are extremely complex, comprising not only traditional issues of foreign policy but also seemingly domestic matters such as veterans' affairs and the construction of city roads (to facilitate access to border crossings). Evidence of this lies in the fact that the U.S. Embassy in Mexico, and its nine consulates, have representation from more than 20 government departments and agencies. Mexico, for its part, may have fewer attaches working in its embassy in Washington than in the recent past, but has put in place across the United States the most extensive consular network in the world in order to provide services to its citizens and build relations with U.S. subnational governments and non-governmental stakeholders. At a diplomatic level, with the exception of some recent concerns about the impact of Mexican budgetary austerity on its representation in Washington, U.S.-Mexico relations have strong institutional support. Nonetheless, a significant challenge exists when it comes to driving progress on issues that require support from across U.S. and Mexican national and subnational governments.

For example, in 2015, the two countries opened the first new rail crossing at the U.S.-Mexico border in more than a century outside of Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Tamaulipas. On the U.S. side, the project was supported by a federal Department of Transportation grant as well as state and local funding and required the support of the Department of State and Homeland Security, among other agencies. Mexico also contributed funding and coordinated across the government to develop the project. The vast majority of this complex coordination across countries and agencies was smooth and successful, if not always agile, but in the end an act of political will and leadership was needed to get the project across the finish line. Construction of the bridge had been nearly complete by the end of 2012, but a dispute emerged among local officials and DHS regarding the movement of a cargo-scanning device to the new crossing that delayed its opening.

In 2013, the United States and Mexico had formed the High Level Economic Dialogue, an institution designed to coordinate bilateral economic policy. In the end, it was an innovative act of binational coordination that allowed the crossing to open, with the Mexican government agreeing to share the images from its own train cargo scanner until the U.S. could install the device. Similar examples of projects, in which institutionalized cooperation and acts of leadership are required to drive progress, can be found across the U.S.-Mexico relationship.

### **Moving Forward:**

After the inauguration of a new or reelected U.S. president in 2021, the United States and Mexico should host a joint cabinet meeting to kick off a new era of cooperation under the framework of the USMCA and to launch a new high-level mechanism for the coordination of bilateral cooperation across the economic, security and migration spheres. Such an effort would draw on the successes (and learn from the shortcomings) of previous efforts, including the Binational Commission, the Security and Prosperity Partnership, and the High Level Economic Dialogue. The key to developing and sustaining high-level engagement in U.S.-Mexico relations is to create a positive synergy between working groups and principals, in which the working groups can rely on the principals for support to move past bottlenecks. In turn, the working groups both explore and implement projects identified by the principles as well as provide the principals with sufficient material and progress to warrant participation in high-level dialogue.



# Conclusion

Since this group of ambassadors began managing U.S.-Mexico relations in the late 1980s, a sea change has occurred. Mexico's internal democratic and economic reforms set the stage for NAFTA, which in turn spurred deep regional economic integration and further democratic reform. The United States and Mexico no longer simply trade goods, but rather, through supply chain integration, produce them together. U.S. and Mexican competitiveness are now interlinked, with the three countries of North America competing as a regional bloc in the global economy. In the wake of 9/11 and in the context of increasing threats from transnational organized crime, economic integration paved the way for enhanced security cooperation. The notion of shared responsibility replaced a tendency toward mutual recrimination in addressing the regional drug trade, and cross-border law enforcement cooperation and intelligence sharing grew markedly. Cooperation on border management, environmental protection, natural resource management, counterterrorism, migration, and a plethora of other issues grew in the context of neighborly bilateral relations that took root in the NAFTA era.

The progress in government-to-government relations, however, was never as stable or smooth as it appeared. This was made clear when NAFTA itself, which had served as the bedrock upon which so many bilateral mechanisms were constructed, was put up for renegotiation in the context of charged rhetoric and turbulence throughout bilateral relations. The depth of bilateral economic ties meant that a diverse group of stakeholders had skin in the game and were able to rally together to support the successful completion of the USMCA negotiations and its passage with broad support across political parties in all three countries. Still, the risk associated with having a cornerstone policy for positive U.S.-Mexico relations exist for years with not much more than the support of 50 percent of the U.S. population was clearly exposed. Migration and security cooperation are similarly exposed to polarized and at times politicized public debate. Increasing goodwill and public understanding of the importance of U.S.-Mexico cooperation is more important than ever in the current era of widespread polarization and disinformation, and the governments of Mexico and the United States must redouble efforts to build public support for strong bilateral relations.

Importantly, in the context of first H5N1 and then H1N1 during the 2000s, the United States and Mexico developed cooperative mechanisms and protocols to manage the spread of pandemics across the region. The current outbreak of COVID-19 is a public health challenge that goes well beyond the scope of anything experienced in recent decades, but the precedent for cooperation and the toolkit put together by the two governments has created a strong foundation upon which to work together to face the current crisis. The bilateral measures put in place to restrict non-essential travel across the border stand out as an example of effective collaboration in response to COVID-19, but more fragmented approaches to emergency supply chain management demonstrate the need for still greater cooperation in crisis management in light of economic integration.

This moment of crisis exposes the importance of institutionalized mechanisms for cooperation. They provide spaces for officials to build cross-border relationships and periodic reminders to think regionally, allowing the United States and Mexico to depend on one another during an emergency.

The United States and Mexico are no longer Distant Neighbors, as Alan Riding put it in the 1980s. To be sure, some distance remains. We still struggle to understand one another fully. We each have a strong pride in our independence. Yet, we have become interdependent. The COVID-19 pandemic has proven our partnership indispensable. We jointly manufacture the ventilators keeping patients alive in both countries during this moment of crisis. We work together to fight organized crime and terrorism. We share the benefits and challenges of migration within our region. Yes, some distance remains, but we are closer than ever. The benefits of partnership are clear, and now we must work together to build understanding and trust so that the partnership endures and grows ever stronger.



# About

## **U.S.-Mexico Foundation**

The US-Mexico Foundation (USMF) is a bi-national, non-profit organization dedicated to fostering bilateral cooperation and a better understanding between the United States and Mexico. The organization began operations in 2009 with initial funds from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation and the Business Foundation in Mexico (Fundemex). USMF carries out its mission in two ways: operating programs and promoting constructive dialogue on key issues of binational interest. Current programs include: U.S. Mexico 360, a public diplomacy initiative that provides an opportunity for U.S. leaders and Mexico meet with their counterparts on a professional study tour in Mexico and the US; the Rio Bravo Congressional Fellowship, a nonpartisan program that connects US and Mexican legislative assistants with experts in the area of bilateral relations; and Mexican Newscast in the USA, the Mexican radio program that is broadcast from the United States to communicate to a Mexican audience the important problems at stake on the northern border.

<https://www.usmexicofound.org>

## **Mexico Institute, Wilson Center**

The Wilson Center provides a strictly nonpartisan space for the worlds of policymaking and scholarship to interact. By conducting relevant and timely research and promoting dialogue from all perspectives, it works to address the critical current and emerging challenges confronting the United States and the world. The Wilson Center's

Mexico Institute seeks to improve understanding, communication, and cooperation between Mexico and the United States by promoting original research, encouraging public discussion, and proposing policy options for enhancing the bilateral relationship.

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