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The Evolving and Diversifying Nature of Migration to the U.S.-Mexico Border

FEBRUARY 16, 2017 FEATURE | By Jessica Bolter

The recent focus on walling off the entire 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border, adding thousands of Border Patrol agents, and keeping “bad hombres” out obscures the quiet reality that has been unfolding at the Southwest border over recent years: Unauthorized Mexican inflows are down dramatically; rising Central American arrivals are seeking humanitarian protection, not evading detection; and flows are diversifying.

Apprehensions of Mexicans crossing the Southwest border without authorization dropped to a near 50-year low in fiscal year (FY) 2015, with the 186,017 arrests recorded that year a fraction of the 1.6 million peak hit in FY 2000. In FY 2014, unauthorized migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (known collectively as the Northern Triangle of Central America) were encountered in greater numbers than migrants from Mexico, marking the first such occurrence. After a decrease in FY 2015, apprehensions from the Northern Triangle again outpaced Mexican ones in FY 2016.

Beneath this historic shift lies a subtler one: Not only have Central American arrivals at the border overtaken the traditionally dominant Mexican flows, but the flows of foreign nationals arriving without prior authorization are diversifying, with growing numbers of Cubans, Haitians, and Africans and Asians of several nationalities. This trend was particularly evident in FY 2016 when U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) recorded at least 55,000 arrivals without prior authorization through the first eleven months of the year by people from outside Latin America, the vast majority presenting themselves at ports of entry rather than seeking to evade detection. Most of these were Cubans and Haitians seeking admission to the United States via preferred channels.

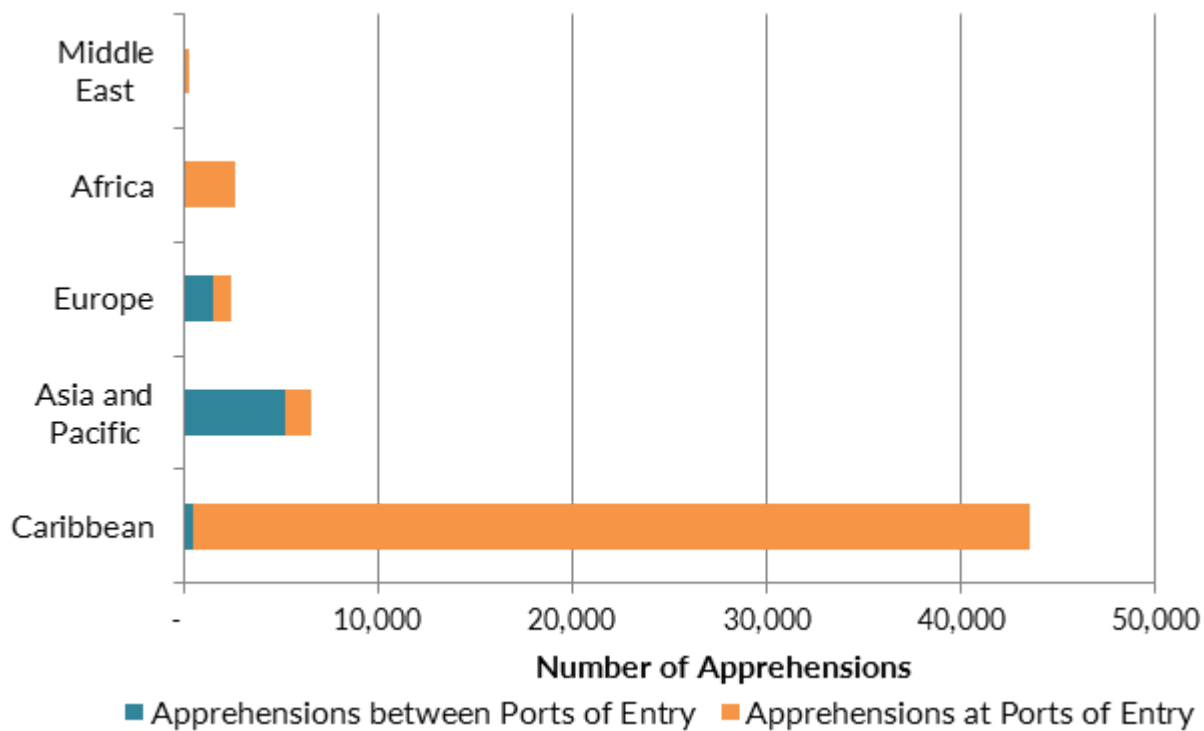
Although the overall flows at the border differ somewhat in their underlying drivers, timelines, and characteristics, they have all contributed to an increasingly complex situation at the U.S.-Mexico border and along routes through Central America and Mexico to the United States. These migrants pose new immigration and foreign policy challenges for U.S. officials and regional governments, and are reshaping regional attitudes toward migration. As the Trump administration presses ahead with plans to seek congressional appropriation

for billions of dollars to wall off the border and add new Border Patrol agents, the changing patterns of arrivals have important implications for current policy debates. This article explores the makeup of these new flows, examines responses thus far, and discusses future policy implications for regional migration flows.

Characteristics of Flows: From the Caribbean and Beyond

While putting new pressures on the U.S. immigration system, these emerging flows from countries outside Latin America present a different challenge in that most are not seeking to cross the border illicitly. Of the more than 55,000 apprehensions of non-Latin Americans at the U.S.-Mexico border during the first eleven months of FY 2016, 48,000 occurred as individuals presented themselves to authorities at ports of entry (see Figure 1). Many of those from the Caribbean, while deemed inadmissible, were paroled into the United States pending a hearing in immigration court. Until September 22, 2016, when the Obama administration resumed deportations of Haitians after a six-year suspension, Haitians without prior authorization were paroled into the country and placed into long-term removal proceedings. And until January 12, 2017, when the Obama administration ended the long-standing “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy, Cubans were also paroled into the country, in their case becoming eligible for legal permanent residence one year later under terms of the Cuban Adjustment Act. Africans and Asians, on the other hand, are placed into expedited removal proceedings and detained pending either those proceedings or an asylum hearing if they submitted an asylum claim.

Figure 1. Non-Latin American Apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexico Border, FY 2016*



* The data represented are for the first 11 months of fiscal 2016.

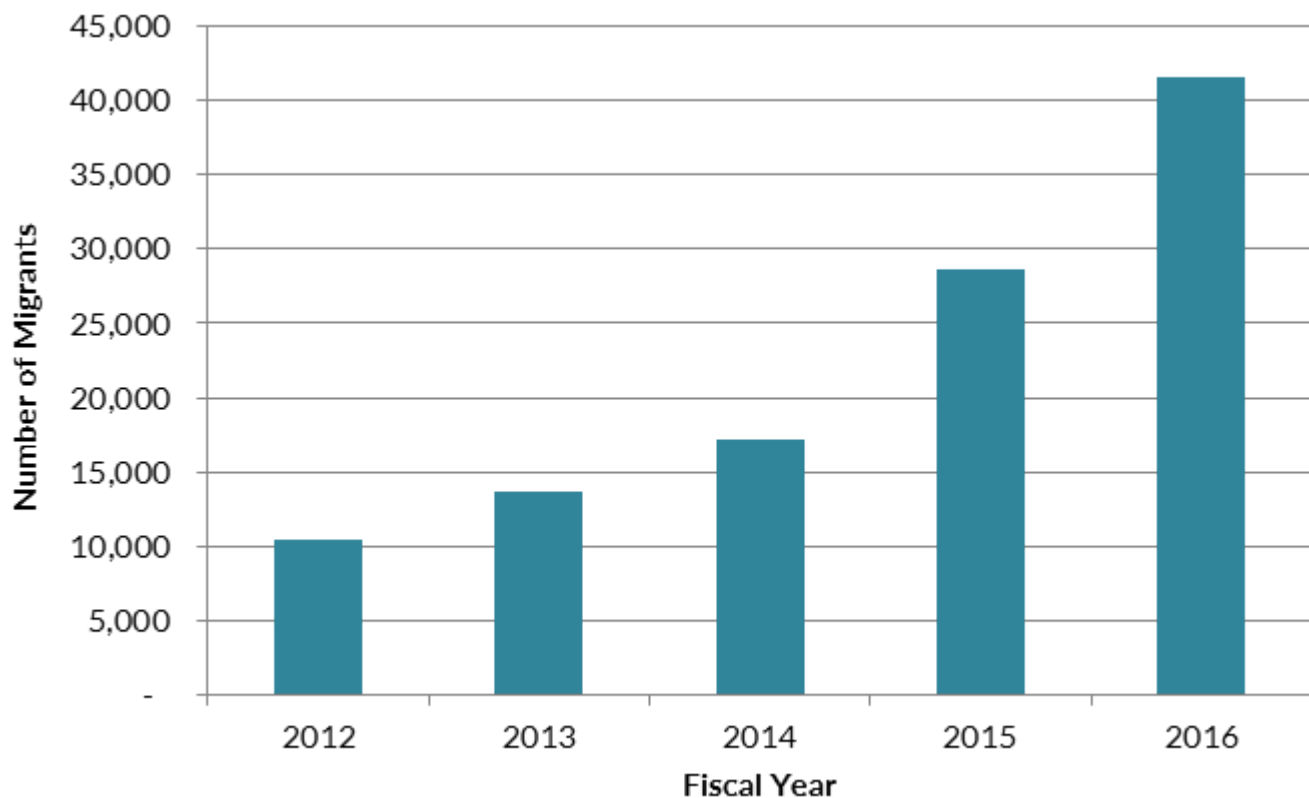
Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data cited by Alexandra Zavis, “The Sharp Rise in Non-Latin American Migrants Trying to Cross into the U.S. From Mexico,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 2016, [available online](#).

Cubans

While large numbers of Cubans have migrated to the United States since the Cuban Revolution in 1959, aided in part by decades of preferential treatment under U.S. immigration law, the significant migration that emerged in recent years differed in several ways. This wave of migration has its roots in a number of reforms to the economy. Cuban President Raúl Castro in 2011 allowed Cubans to sell real estate, in 2012 to sell cars, and in 2013 to travel outside the country without first obtaining an exit visa. These reforms meant that instead of leaving illegally and risking their lives attempting to cross the Florida Straits while dodging the U.S. Coast Guard, which would return them to Cuba under the “wet-foot, dry-foot policy,” Cubans could now obtain funds and purchase plane tickets to legally exit Cuba. Many flew into Guyana or Ecuador, which allowed Cubans to enter without visas, and then attempted the land journey north to the United States. This posed problems for governments in Central America as visa policy changes in Nicaragua resulted in thousands of Cubans being temporarily stranded in Costa Rica and Panama before being flown and bused to the U.S.-Mexico border.

The December 2014 announcement that the United States and Cuba would begin normalizing relations after decades of animosity lent a new urgency to the migration wave, particularly following Cuba’s agreement to accept the return of its nationals ordered removed from the United States. Cubans worried that normalization could bring an end to U.S. policies that treated all Cuban arrivals as equivalent to political refugees. While fewer than 6,000 Cubans without visas presented themselves at ports of entry along the Southwest border in FY 2010, more than 41,500 did so in FY 2016 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Cuban Arrivals without Authorization at Southwest Border Ports of Entry, FY 2012-16



Source: CBP, “Southwest Border Inadmissibles by Field Office,” updated January 18, 2017, [available online](#).

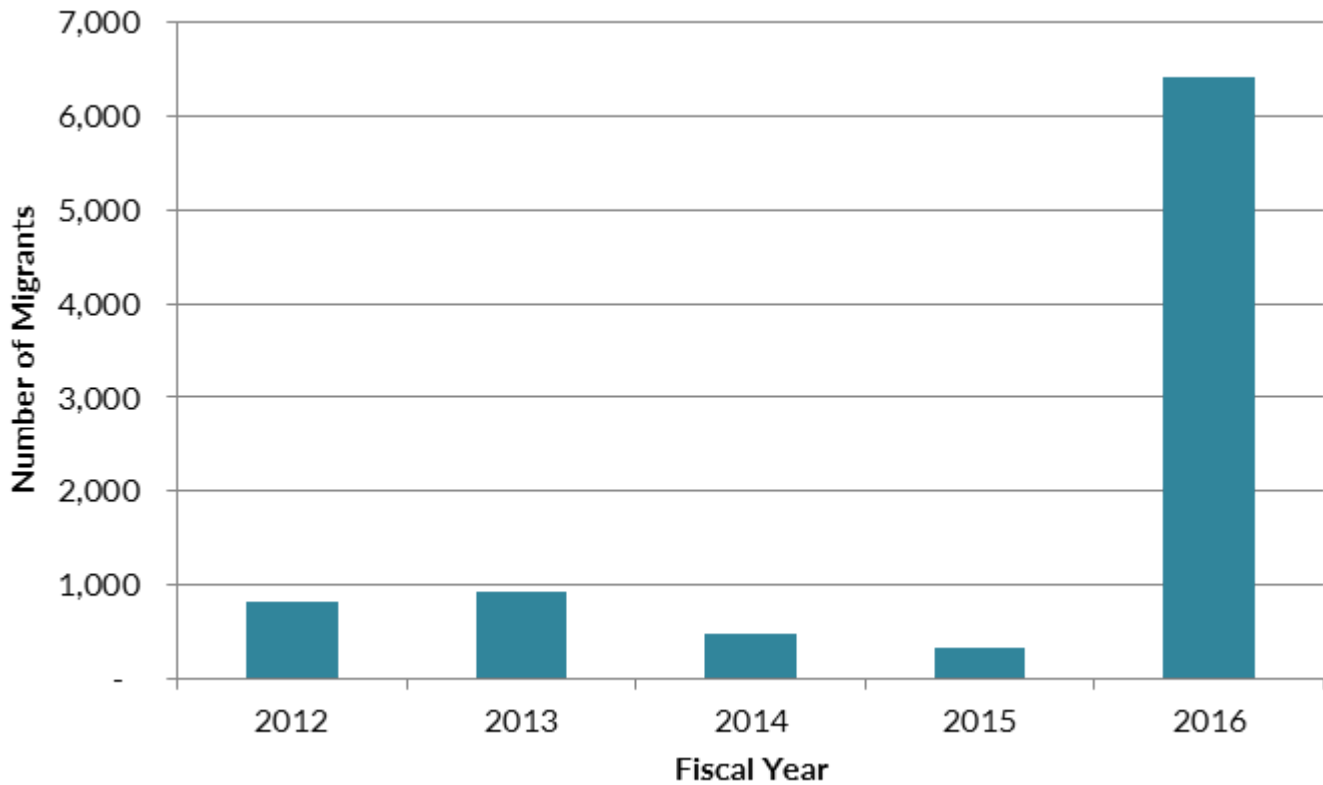
Cubans arriving at ports of entry since the January 2017 revocation of the “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy are either detained and placed in expedited removal proceedings or are allowed to withdraw their applications for admission and voluntarily leave the country. Although the long-term effects of the policy change are still unclear, there are reports of many Cubans stranded in South and Central America, and CBP data indicate a sharp and immediate drop in attempted entries at ports of entry. Just 279 Cubans presented themselves at ports of entry in Laredo, Texas between January 12-31, 2017 and were found to be inadmissible, compared to 3,846 for all of January 2016. These numbers do not include apprehensions between ports of entry, and so do not indicate whether there is a change in the number of Cubans seeking to evade detection—a possible effect of the revised U.S. policy.

Haitians

Similar to Cubans, Haitian migrants had traditionally reached the United States via the Florida Straits. In 2016, however, Haitian migrants for the most part traveled to the United States by land from Brazil rather than by sea from Haiti. After a 2010 earthquake decimated Haiti, many left to earn a living elsewhere, attracted to construction and related jobs in Brazil ahead of the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics. By December 2016, Brazil had issued about 50,000 permanent humanitarian visas to Haitians who had migrated illegally. But amid economic difficulty and reduced job prospects, Haitians in Brazil began leaving to escape poverty once again.

In May 2016, migrant shelters along the route from Brazil to the United States began reporting an uptick in Haitian migrants. Government figures appear to support that consensus. In the first eight months of FY 2016, 1,484 Haitians presented themselves to border authorities in San Diego—the only port of entry where a significant number of Haitians arrived that year. About 5,000 arrived from May through September, far higher than in prior years (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Inadmissible Haitian Migrants at Southwest Border Ports of Entry, FY 2012-16



Source: CBP, "Southwest Border Inadmissibles by Field Office."

As with Cubans, U.S. policy toward Haitians has also changed. Since September 22, 2016, Haitians deemed inadmissible have been detained by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and placed in expedited removal proceedings rather than permitted to enter the country. While the number of inadmissible Haitians arriving at ports of entry has continued to rise in FY 2017, reaching 7,129 during the first three months, it is unclear whether that increase is the result of migrants who traveled in 2016 still filtering in or represents new outflows.

Africans and Asians

Even as inflows of Africans and Asians at the Southwest border are rising, the numbers remain insignificant as a share of overall arrivals. As European countries have tightened migration restrictions after record inflows of asylum seekers and migrants in 2015, some Africans and Asians fleeing conflict and poverty appear to be flying to Latin American countries with relatively lenient visa policies, such as Ecuador, Brazil, and Cuba, then turning to established regional migration networks.

From January to July 2016, 7,882 Africans and Asians presented themselves at Mexican immigration checkpoints, compared to 4,261 in all of 2015 and 1,831 in 2014, according to Mexican authorities. Almost all of these migrants transit through Mexico to the United States. Migrant flows increased from several countries in particular. Mexican authorities apprehended 1,399 migrants from India and 552 from Nepal in the first half of 2016, compared to 140 and 72 in 2014, and 576 and 500 in 2015, respectively. There was also a less drastic but still steady increase in Ghanaians: 396 were apprehended in the first six months of 2016, compared to 169 in 2014.

Finally, countries in the region have recorded a sudden spike in migrants who report being from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Mexico apprehended one DRC migrant in 2014, eight in 2015, and 1,982 during the first six months of 2016. However, press reports suggest that Haitian migrants have claimed to be from the DRC, in hopes of being less likely targets for repatriation from Mexico and other transit countries. Although DRC migrant numbers are likely overstated due to this phenomenon, the other, less dramatic, increases in African and Asian migration are still essential to understanding the diversifying migrant flows traveling north.

Regional Responses

As these diverse flows grow, countries that historically have been sources for migrants rather than transit countries have had to reckon with the influx. They have often done so in an uncoordinated fashion, haphazardly closing borders and causing periodic buildups of migrants, overwhelming local shelters and infrastructure. Hundreds of Cubans occupied a bodega in Colombia for months. One northern Mexico shelter, accustomed to housing 600 migrants per month, hosted 1,000 monthly by September 2016—and another, accommodating 271 Haitians in October, reported turning away hundreds more. The pressure that these flows impose leads to public and governmental outcry against migrants and policies of neighboring countries, including the United States, which—as the ultimate destination for most—Central American publics and governments see as perpetuating the problem.

Over the longer term, these countries have unified forcefully, particularly surrounding Cuban migration. In August 2016, the foreign ministers of Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, and Peru wrote Secretary of State John Kerry, urging termination of the “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy. They argued the U.S. policy encouraged “a disorderly, irregular, and unsafe flow of Cubans,” and also complained that even as the United States was granting preferential treatment to Cubans, far less generous policies were applied to Central American migrants.

Despite the longer-term unity, it is short-term reactions to the diversifying flows that have in some cases led to domino effects elsewhere:

- **Ecuador:** The Ecuadoran government, a political ally of Cuba, abruptly started requiring visas from Cubans in November 2015, setting aside the visa-free travel that had made Ecuador a popular starting point for Cuban land journeys since 2008. This change was largely thought to be a response to pressure from the Cuban government as it tried to stem the emigrant flows. Many Cubans then altered their routes, flying into Guyana which still did not require entry visas.
- **Nicaragua:** Another Cuban ally, Nicaragua closed its southern border in November 2015, causing a months-long buildup of 8,000 Cuban migrants in Costa Rica and 3,000 in Panama, as well as periodic stranding of Haitians and Africans. The government later accused Nicaraguans who aided unauthorized migrants of engaging in human trafficking.
- **Costa Rica:** Swamped with Cuban migrants, whom it eventually arranged to airlift to Mexico following Nicaragua’s border closure, Costa Rica closed its own southern border with Panama to Cubans in December 2015. After then dealing with periodic buildups of hundreds of African migrants, it closed the

border to all irregular migrants in August 2016. That month the president stated, “The government does not have any more capacity to shelter anyone else.”

- **Panama:** In April 2016, feeling the pressure of having more than 1,000 Cubans stuck at its northern border with Costa Rica, Panama’s president, Juan Carlos Varela, implored the other Central American countries, particularly Nicaragua, to “reconsider the measure of closing its border.” One month later, however, in response to the increased flows of Cuban and African migrants crossing into the country from Colombia, Panama closed key points of entry at its own southern border.
- **Colombia:** Although it officially requires visas for entry, Colombia is fairly lenient at its borders. In August 2016, the northern border town of Turbo declared a public emergency—previously used primarily for natural disasters—due to the thousands of migrants, mostly Cubans, who had been stranded in the town since June, about when Panama closed its border.

Mexico

Mexico has become a destination for an increasing number of Central Americans. Increased enforcement within Mexico has made it more difficult for Central Americans to reach the United States, causing them to settle in Mexico instead. However, Mexico remains a transit country for many, including Cubans, Haitians, Africans, and Asians. Mexico has not focused enforcement efforts on Cubans, because unlike Central Americans, the United States had accepted them. Africans, Asians, and Haitians claiming to be Africans were more difficult and expensive to repatriate than Central Americans. For these reasons, Mexico has facilitated the northern migration of these four groups with 20-day transit visas. By January 20, when it became clear that Cubans could no longer enter the United States without prior authorization, Mexico deported 91 Cubans who had been awaiting a 20-day transit visa, indicating a shift in policy.

U.S. Response to Diversifying Flows

The United States reacted similarly to the transit countries, in that it effectively closed its borders to Haitians and Cubans, as detailed above. Even though the Obama administration’s policy changes on treatment of Haitian and Cuban migrants may have been intended to stem long-term flows, in the short term, they added to pressures on the immigration court and detention systems. The daily number of immigrants in detention, which has fluctuated between 31,000 and 34,000 in recent years, rose to a record high of 41,000 by November 2016. By the end of November, more than 4,400 Haitians were in detention. In fact, Haitians took up so much detention space following the policy change that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) released 900 Haitian migrants for lack of space over the next two months.

Just as buildups of migrants occurred in Central America when borders there closed, the U.S. change in policy toward Haitians has resulted in a large buildup in Tijuana, Mexico. In mid-October, the regional director of Mexico’s immigration agency in Baja California estimated there were between 4,000 and 4,500 Haitians stuck in the state, waiting for appointments to ask U.S. border officials for asylum. The more recent closing to Cubans resulted in buildups all along the route, as these migrants suddenly lost their privileged status.

Future Challenges

Regardless of actions by U.S. and regional governments, the push factors for many of these diverse flows will not abate anytime soon. As Brazilian political and economic conditions continue to deteriorate, there is diminishing hope for a better life for the tens of thousands of Haitians still living there. Haiti itself is still recovering from Hurricane Matthew in October 2016 and the spread of cholera that followed. While African and Asian migrants are also escaping poverty, thousands also flee persecution and apply for asylum in the United States. Though the flow of Cubans is somewhat different, in that it may have been motivated largely by pull factors, Cubans continue to struggle economically. Further, the pull factor of deep and intricate family ties in the United States, developed over a century, will not dissolve with the end of “wet-foot, dry-foot.”

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