

# **Central American Migration in the United States, Spain and Mexico After The Great Recession: A Three-Way Game?**

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After the Great Recession, migration flows from Central American countries -especially those originating in Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala- increased notably in Spain, contributing to a second migration boom in this country. The reasons for this increase are to be found both in the internal factors of expulsion - economic and political crisis and citizen insecurity - and in the increased control and restrictions on entry to the United States - the traditional destination of these flows, which in fact also increased the presence of these populations in Mexico, until then exclusively a transit country. Our starting hypothesis is that this three-way restructuring of flows, disrupted by Covid-19, is not a simple redirection, but a diversification. Thus, the population that now goes to Spain has different socio-demographic characteristics from that which traditionally went to the United States, while that which now remains in Mexico also shows a selective process with respect to both that which will end up entering the United States and that which migrates to Spain. To test this hypothesis, this proposal aims to comparatively analyse the characteristics of the Central American populations residing in the United States, Spain and Mexico from 2014 to 2021, using census data from the three countries.

**Keywords:** International migration, United States, Mexico, Spain, Central America.

## **Introduction**

Following the Great Recession of 2008-2013, political and economic factors explain the restructuring of migration systems originating in Central America, influenced by restrictive migration policies, and by the effect of the Covid syndemic in 2020 and 2021. Thus, in a three-way game, the traditional Mesoamerican migration system, which included Mexico as an exclusive transit country (Durand, 2016), has seen, on the one hand, the hardening of US flow control policies, and on the other, the deterioration of the political and economic situation, increasing citizen security problems in the Central American countries involved (Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala).

As a consequence, the frustration of these migratory flows has resulted in: 1) on the US side, in the restriction and greater selectivity of the individuals involved; 2) on the Mexican side, in an increase in irregular migration in Mexico, parallel to the increase in refugee applications from nationals of these countries in Mexico, progressively becoming a destination country; and 3) in the emergence of Spain as a new destination for these flows, giving rise to the appearance of a new migratory system. "Migratory System" understood as "a set of places linked by flows and counter-flows of people, goods, services and information, which tend to facilitate further exchange, including migration, between the places" (De Haas, 2010: 1593).

## **Objetives and hypothesis**

The main objective of this proposal is to offer a comparative analysis of the changes in migration trajectories and the resulting populations of Central Americans in the three destinations mentioned: the United States, Mexico and Spain. The main hypothesis is that the reorientation of these flows, from the

United States to Mexico (either by force, by non-admission or expulsion in the United States, or as a consolidated destination country), and the flows that now go to Spain, do not have the same socio-demographic profiles. Thus, while expulsion factors - political, economic and security-related - continue to be determining factors in the reasons for emigration to these countries, demand factors and the existence of a consolidated migration system (as in the case of the United States), or the construction of a new one (as in Spain), explain the difference between the two flows.

### Statistical sources and methodology

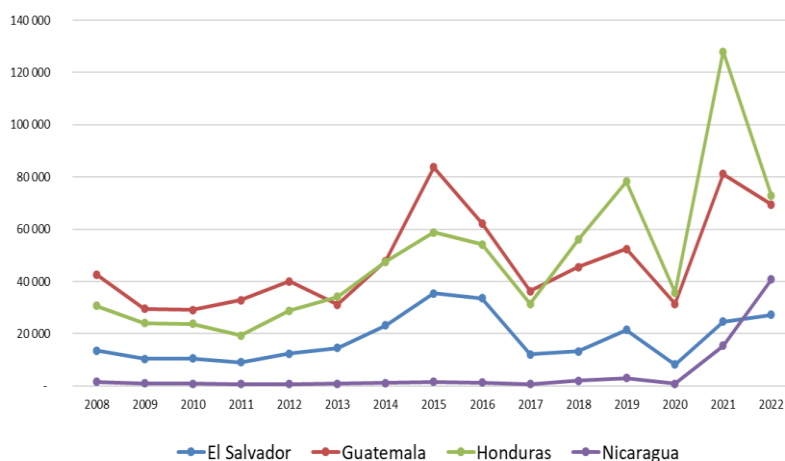
In order to study the migratory flows of Central Americans in Mexico, we have used statistics from the *Unidad de Política Migratoria, Registro e Identidad de Personas*, on the one hand, and statistics from the *Comisión de Ayuda a los refugiados*, on the other. In the case of migratory flows to Spain, we have used the *Estadística de Variaciones Residenciales* produced by the National Institute of Statistics, while in the case of the United States, we have used Border control data. For the study of the characteristics of immigrant populations, the latest population censuses of the United States (2020), Mexico (2020) and Spain (2021) will be used. In terms of methodology, along with the classic descriptive demographic analysis, a multivariate model will be constructed to compare the characteristics of migrants in the three countries.

### First Results

#### *Central American migrants in Mexico*

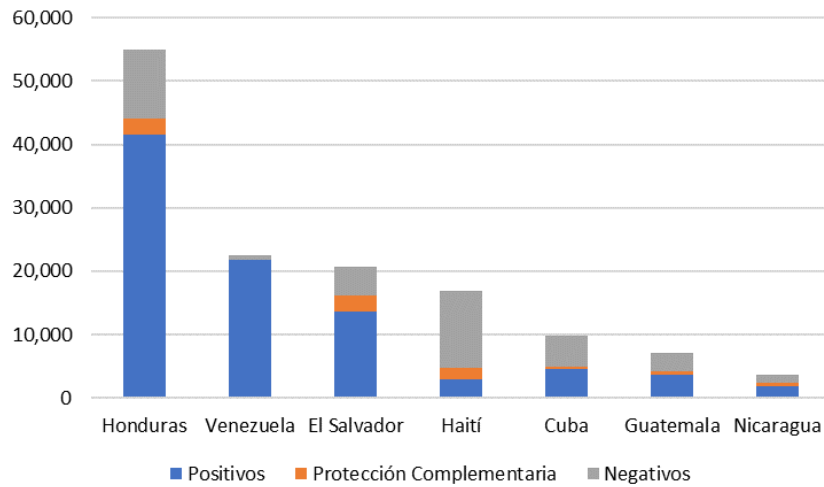
Estimates of irregular migration flows show a notable increase since 2013, with the impact in 2017 of the border closures announced in 2016 by the Trump administration and the effect of COVID-19 in 2020 (Figure 1). In Mexico, the majority of migrants in transit through the country originate from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, shaping and sustaining the so-called Mesoamerican Migration System, which in recent years has been joined by Nicaragua. One of the main effects of the deterioration of the situation in Central American countries in relation to the tightening of migration policies in the United States has been the increase in asylum applications made in Mexico (Figure 2). According to the records of the Mexican Commission for Refugee Aid (COMAR), it can be seen that, since 2018, the number of asylum seekers has increased, with the greatest increase between 2020 and 2022, rising from 41,000 to 130,000 and 118,000 in that three-year period. Although the majority of applications are of Central American origin, essentially from Honduras (from 15,000 to 36,000 to 31,000 in the three-year period in question), the appearance of Nicaraguans in recent years stands out (803 applications in 2020 to 8,971 in 2022). It should be noted that applications for international protection from Central Americans usually account for around a third of all applications.

**Figure 1. Evolution of irregular migration flows (detentions) from Central America to Mexico, 2008-2022**



Source: Estadísticas de la Unidad de Política Migratoria, Registro e Identidad de Personas, SEGOB, México.

**Figure 2. Applications for refuge in Mexico, by country of origin and type of resolution, 2013-2022**



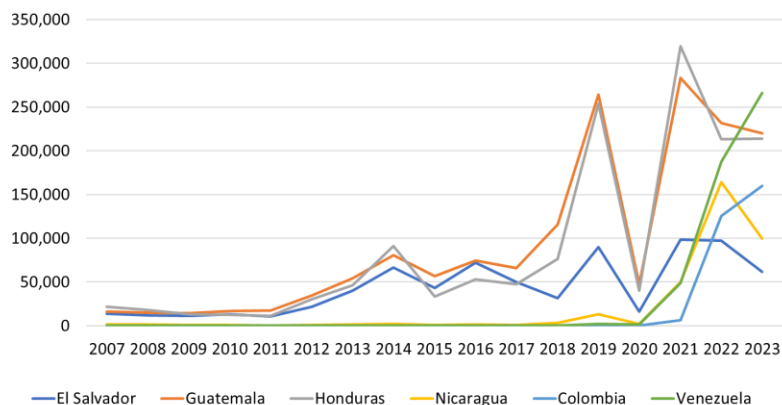
Source: Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (COMAR), México.

### *Migration of Central Americans in the United States*

Although the information from the ACS makes it possible to quantify the resident population in the United States, due to the characteristics of irregular immigration of thousands of Mexican and Central American people arriving in that country, the information is a reference estimate. Also in this case, the increase since 2013 is exceptional, with the cyclical incidents that COVID-19 has represented (Figure 3).

In the case of the United States, based on estimates from the 2019 American Community Survey, the United States had a population of 328 million people, of which almost 15% are people born in another country. Residents born in countries belonging to the Mesoamerican region are one of the groups with the largest presence: the population born in Mexico represents 3.4% (just over 11 million people) and from Central America 1.2% (almost 4 million people). One of the characteristics of migration flows in this region is the constant arrival of Mexicans and Central Americans in the United States: on average, 175,000 Mexicans and 150,000 people from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and other Central American countries arrive each year, with those from the Central American region growing in greater proportion than Mexicans within the group (3.8% and 1.5%, respectively).

**Fig. 3. Arrests on the southwest border in the United States, by country of origin, 2007-2023**

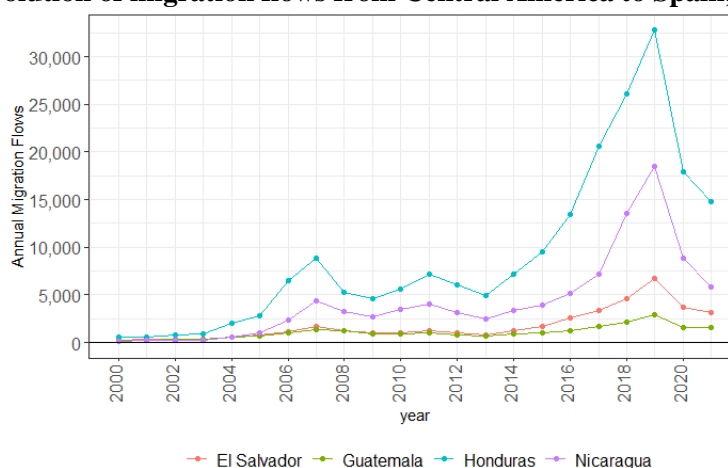


Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

### Central American migrants in Spain

Flows from Central America to Spain were not significant during the first migration boom (1996-2007), in no case exceeding ten thousand arrivals per year. On the other hand, and despite the economic crisis, inflows suffered a smaller decline compared to other origins, and in recent years they are clear protagonists of the second migratory boom, when in 2019 Honduras and Nicaragua appear among the main origins of migrants arriving in Spain (7th and 13th respectively, 4th and 10th if we take into account only women) (Figure 4). As a result, in 2022, 265,000 people originating from the four Central American countries with the highest volume of migrants (with 150,000 Hondurans and 69,000 Nicaraguans) were residing in Spain, with a profile in which women are the protagonists, accounting for almost 70% of residents. In terms of educational level, there is a growing proportion of young people with university studies, 17% among Hondurans and 28.7% among Nicaraguans, considering the 25-29 age group.

**Fig. 4. Evolution of migration flows from Central America to Spain, 2000-2021**



Source: Estadística de Variaciones Residenciales, 2000-2021, INE data.

### Expected results

The first expected result is a change in the profile of migrants who go to the United States, focusing more on family migrations from the old migratory chains than on satisfying labour market demand. In the case of Mexico, the situation is expected to polarise between those who are rejected and those who finally obtain a refugee residence permit, while in the case of Spain, they would be mostly women, with a higher level of education and more urban areas of origin, than those who traditionally went to the United States, with a higher proportion of men and rural areas.

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