

Immigration reform in the USA: health must come first



The International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Missing Migrant Project found that 2022 was the deadliest year on record for migrants and identified the USA–Mexico border as the most dangerous overland migration route in the world. The perilous journeys migrants are forced to make expose them to a vast array of health risks. Difficulties in reporting along these clandestine routes mean that the true scale of the challenges migrants experience rarely makes headlines, but the USA's consistent focus on deterrence exacerbates the complex health demands of migration and needlessly exposes vulnerable populations to greater harm.

The most remote stretch of the overland route is the Darién Gap between South America and central America, one of the most hostile environments on Earth. A research letter published in *The Lancet* reviewed all forensic cases of migrant deaths in the Darién Gap from 2018 to 2022 and found the number of confirmed deaths—from drowning, illness, stabbing, gunshot, and unknown causes—steadily rose each year before spiking in 2021. Investigations by IOM and the International Red Cross found that this trend continued into 2023 and that adding disappearances could double these totals, underscoring the difficulty of data collection in a rugged lawless environment. Despite growing awareness of the risks of injury, illness, exhaustion, robbery, violence, and rape, more people are crossing than ever before; over 360 000 migrants have made the treacherous journey so far this year.

Of the 250 000 people who crossed the Darién Gap in 2022, more than 150 000 came from Venezuela, fleeing political persecution, extreme poverty, and a public health crisis. Responding to pressure from the US Government, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Belize imposed visa restrictions which effectively prohibit Venezuelans from lawfully entering and transiting their countries. Migrants are thus forced to arrange to be smuggled by criminal organisations over seven borders across the 4800 km journey to the USA. Exploitation is rife. In Colombia, cartels partner with local authorities to openly market goods and services to migrants at exorbitant prices. In Mexico, migrants awaiting lawful entry to the USA have been assaulted, extorted, robbed, and kidnapped by the same gangs they hired to smuggle them over the border from Guatemala.

Organisations providing help and support are overwhelmed. Las Americas, a non-profit advocacy group that offers legal aid to asylum seekers, fielded 4000 telephone calls per day in August, 2022, and estimated that 70% of callers reported needing medical attention. All people in Mexico are afforded basic health care under the INSABI national insurance programme, but residency requirements and discretionary interpretation of entitlements limit access for migrants. Charitable organisations that operate free clinics on both sides of the border report new arrivals presenting with infections and traumatic injuries, uncontrolled hypertension and diabetes, dehydration, cancer, high-risk pregnancies, and mental health issues, all exacerbated by the stress of migration. In Mexico, where unregulated tent cities have been growing outside of border towns, the few government-run facilities have experienced outbreaks of infectious diseases and maintain limited medical services. This unsustainable situation requires urgent government intervention.

The widely condemned Title 42 Order denied migrants the right to seek asylum on US soil during the COVID-19 public health emergency and directed border agencies to immediately deport people apprehended unlawfully crossing the border. Despite refusing to defend Title 42 during the litigation that ended the programme in May, 2023, the Biden administration has issued its own version of "Remain in Mexico", the Circumvention of Legal Pathways rule. This rule continues to deny those caught crossing the border unlawfully the right to seek asylum and criminalises repeated attempts. The alternative legal pathway requires a mobile application that has been criticised for its poor accessibility and inconsistent connectivity, and often results in months-long waiting times that leave people marooned just metres from access to care they might desperately need.

The Biden administration recently announced measures to support hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans already in the USA, but maintains policies that penalise migrants at the border and abroad. Political polarisation of immigration is obscuring human suffering. The Biden administration needs a health system that stands ready to receive those fleeing violence, starvation, and exploitation. The 2024 elections represent an opportunity for the USA to finally prioritise people before borders and address a burgeoning humanitarian crisis. ■ *The Lancet*



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For the IOM's Missing Migrants Project 2022 Americas Report see <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/2022-americas-overview-missing-migrants-data>

For the research letter on mortality during migration through the Darién Gap in Panama in 2018–22 see *Correspondence Lancet* 2023; published online Sept 26. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(23\)01635-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(23)01635-5).

For more on migration needs at the Darién Gap see *World Report Lancet* 2023; 401: 2029

For more on universal health coverage in Mexico see *Health Policy Lancet* 2023; 402: 731–46

For more on the recent Biden administration immigration reforms see <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2023/09/20/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-takes-new-actions-increase-border>