

A stylized map of the Americas and the Caribbean region, with the landmasses in white and the surrounding oceans in a light blue. The map is centered on the Atlantic Ocean, showing North America, Central America, and the Caribbean islands.

# MIGRATION TRENDS IN CENTRAL AMERICA, NORTH AMERICA, AND THE CARIBBEAN DURING **COVID-19**

November 2020

**International Organization for Migration (IOM)**  
REGIONAL OFFICE IN SAN JOSÉ, COSTA RICA



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>OBJECTIVES OF THE BRIEF</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>IOM'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>RECENT CHANGES IN MOBILITY</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Figure 1:</b> Total monthly entries to the national territory of selected countries, foreigners and / or nationals, 2019 and 2020 .....	<b>5</b>
<b>MIGRANT APPREHENSIONS</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Figure 2:</b> Monthly migrant apprehensions reported on the Southwest United States border, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug).....	<b>7</b>
<b>Figure 3:</b> Apprehensions of migrants originating from countries of Northern Central America (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador) registered by Mexican immigration authorities, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug).....	<b>7</b>
<b>Figure 4:</b> Apprehensions of extracontinental migrants (originating from countries in Africa and Asia) registered by Mexican immigration authorities, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug).....	<b>8</b>
<b>Figure 5:</b> Caribbean and extrarregional migrants identified in irregular transit in the southern zone of Panama (Darién Gap), 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug), by region of origin.....	<b>8</b>
<b>MIGRANT RETURNS</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Figure 6:</b> Migrant returns to Northern Central America (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador) from Mexico and the United States, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug).....	<b>9</b>
<b>Figure 7:</b> Migrant returns to Northern Central America (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador), by country of departure, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug).....	<b>9</b>
<b>ISSUANCE OF VISAS</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Figure 8:</b> H-2A visas (temporary agricultural workers) issued in the United States, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug).....	<b>10</b>
<b>Figure 9:</b> H-2B visas (non-agricultural temporary workers) issued in the United States, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug).....	<b>10</b>
<b>Figure 10:</b> F1 visas (students enrolled in academic programs) issued in the United States, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug).....	<b>11</b>
<b>Figure 11:</b> New applications and extensions approved for temporary residents in Canada, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Jun).....	<b>11</b>
<b>MISSING MIGRANTS</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Figure 12:</b> Missing migrants identified in North America, Central America and the Caribbean, 2014-2020 (Jan-Sept).....	<b>12</b>
<b>Table 1:</b> Missing migrants identified in North America, Central America and the Caribbean, by subregion, 2020 (Jan-Sept).....	<b>12</b>
<b>REMITTANCES</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Figure 13:</b> Top remittance-receiving countries in Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean, in % of GDP, where remittances exceed 10% of GDP (2016-2019).....	<b>13</b>
<b>Figure 14:</b> Top remittance-receiving countries in Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean, in USD billions, where remittances exceed USD 3 billion (2016-2019).....	<b>13</b>
<b>Figure 15:</b> Monthly remittance flows to selected countries (with available data) in the region, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug), in USD millions.....	<b>14</b>

## OBJECTIVES OF THE BRIEF

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a significant impact on the health, social and economic situation in countries of Central America, North America and the Caribbean, and directly or indirectly affects millions of people. Migrants have been particularly impacted by this crisis.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM)'s Regional Office for Central America, North America and the Caribbean presents this brief in order to highlight several key changes and trends in mobility and migration that have occurred during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The brief focuses on official statistics from January to August 2020, using data from 2019 as a reference. Most of the information is derived from official records published and maintained by governments in the region.



## IOM'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

IOM is working with governments and partners to ensure that migrants – in regular or irregular situations, returnees, and displaced persons – are included in efforts to mitigate and combat the pandemic's impact.

IOM's efforts to support vulnerable groups affected by COVID-19, including migrants, are geared towards avoiding harmful complications, minimizing hardship and reducing public health risk. All migrants, in regular or irregular situations, and including those in exploitative situations, should have access to health information, testing, treatment and care. They should also be included in contact tracing and community interventions.

**IOM's Regional Preparedness and Response Plan, for the period from February to December 2020, focuses on four strategic priorities:**

1. Ensure a well-coordinated, informed and timely response through mobility tracking systems and strengthening partnership and coordination structures at the community, national and regional level.
2. Contribute to global, regional, national and community preparedness and response efforts for COVID-19 to reduce associated morbidity and mortality.
3. Ensure access of affected people to basic services and commodities, including health care and protection and social services.
4. Support international, national and local partners to respond to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19.

### See the following resources for more information:

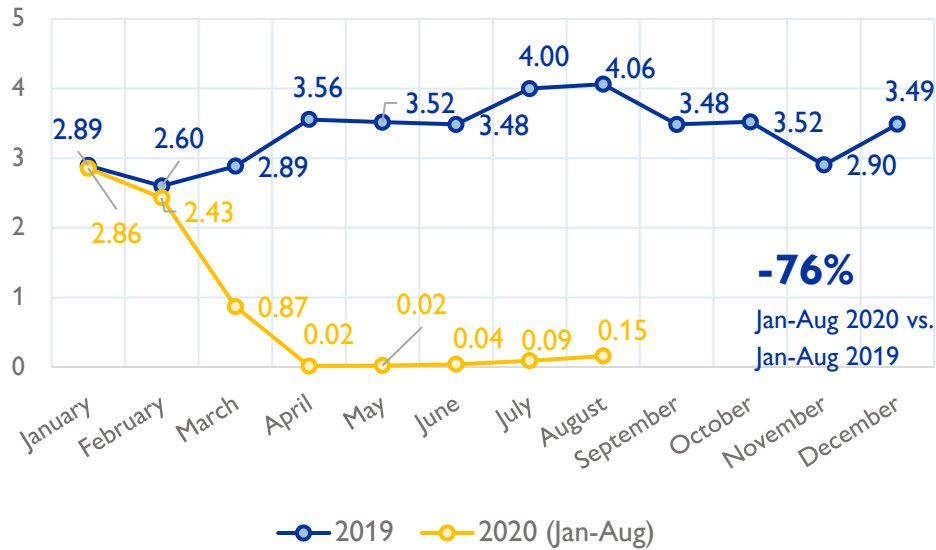
- *IOM Global Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan: Coronavirus Disease 2019*, available [here](#).
- *IOM Regional Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan COVID-19: Central America, North America and the Caribbean*, available [here](#).
- Our online global portal with more information about the impact of COVID-19 on mobility restrictions (*Mobility Impacts COVID-19*), available [here](#).
- Our regional portal with COVID-19 related communication materials, available [here](#).
- COVID-19 situation reports from around the world, available [here](#).

# RECENT CHANGES IN MOBILITY

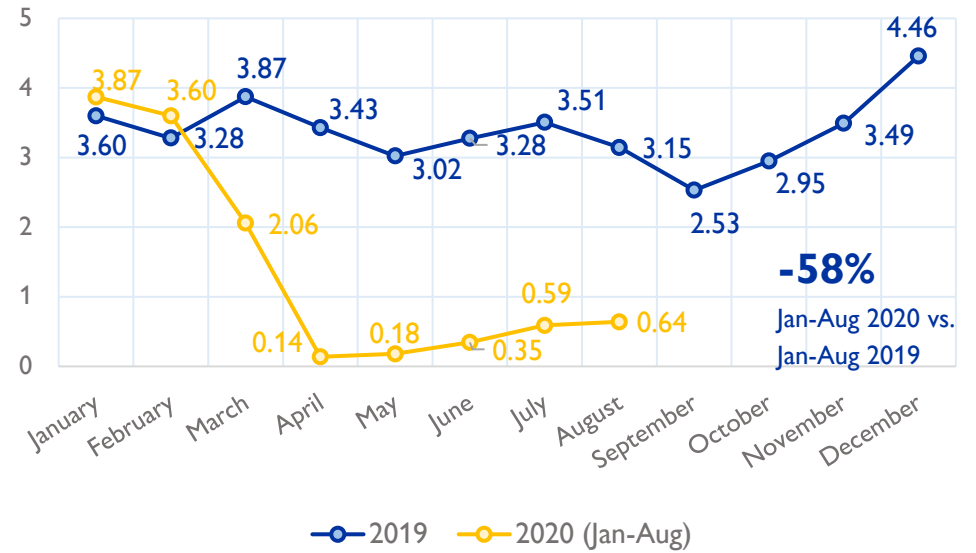


**Figure 1: Total monthly entries to the national territory of selected countries, foreigners and / or nationals, 2019 and 2020**

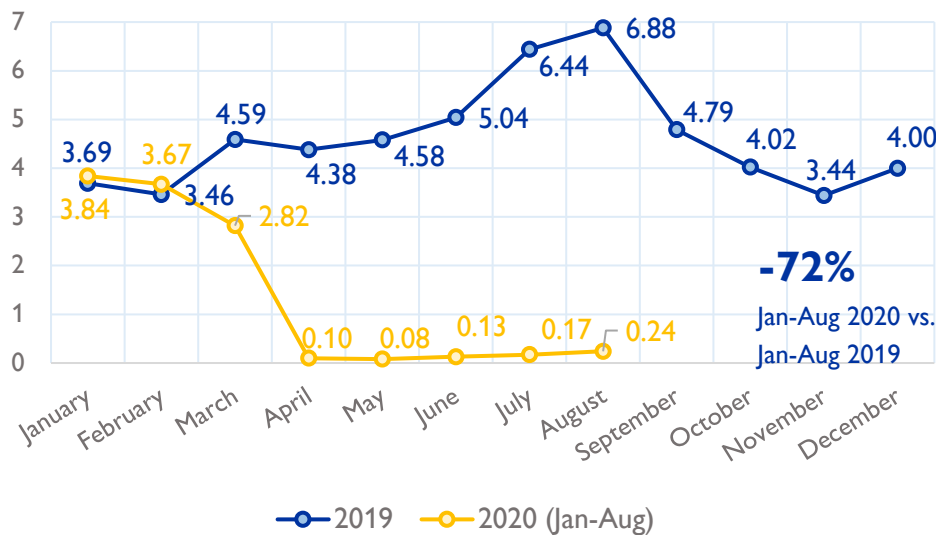
## United States (foreigners, millions, Jan-Aug)



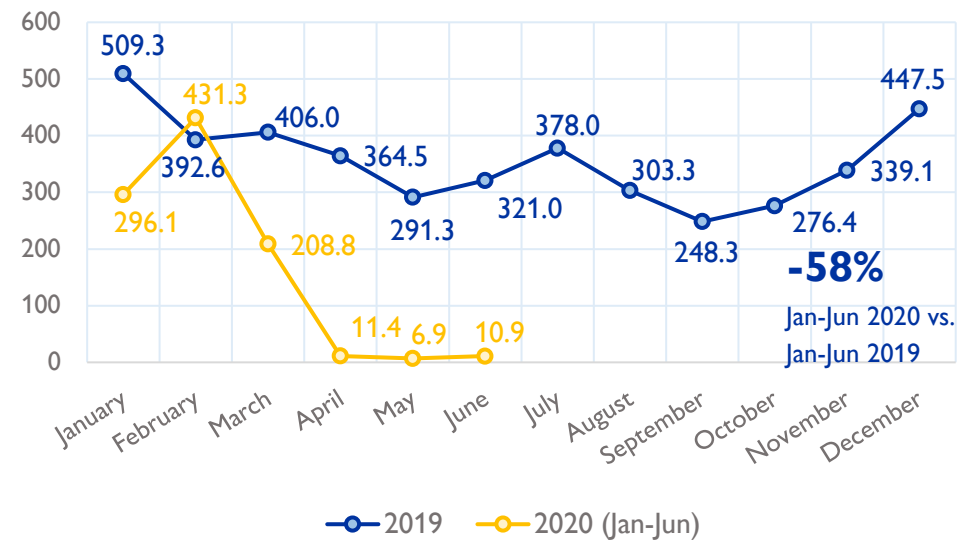
## Mexico (foreigners and nationals, millions, Jan-Aug)



## Canada (foreigners and nationals, millions, Jan-Aug)



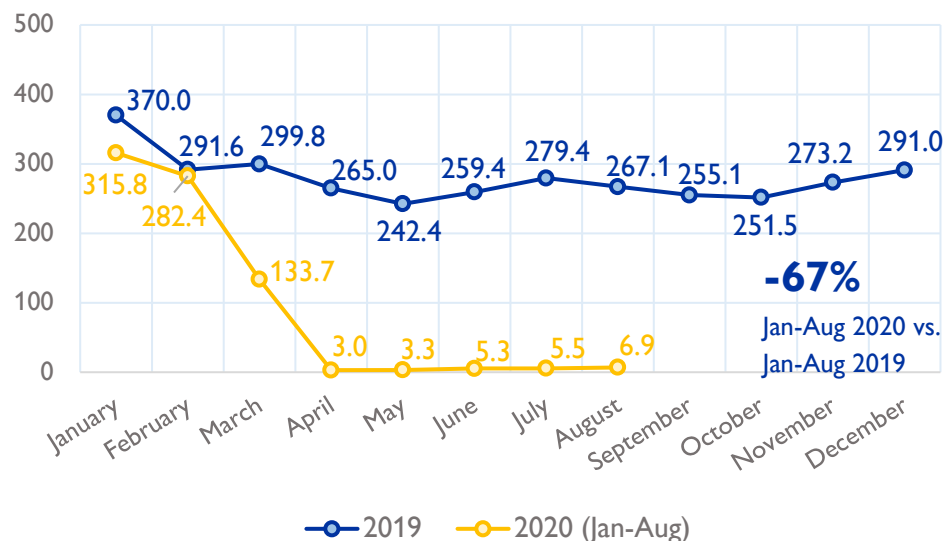
## Costa Rica (foreigners and nationals, thousands, Jan-Jun)



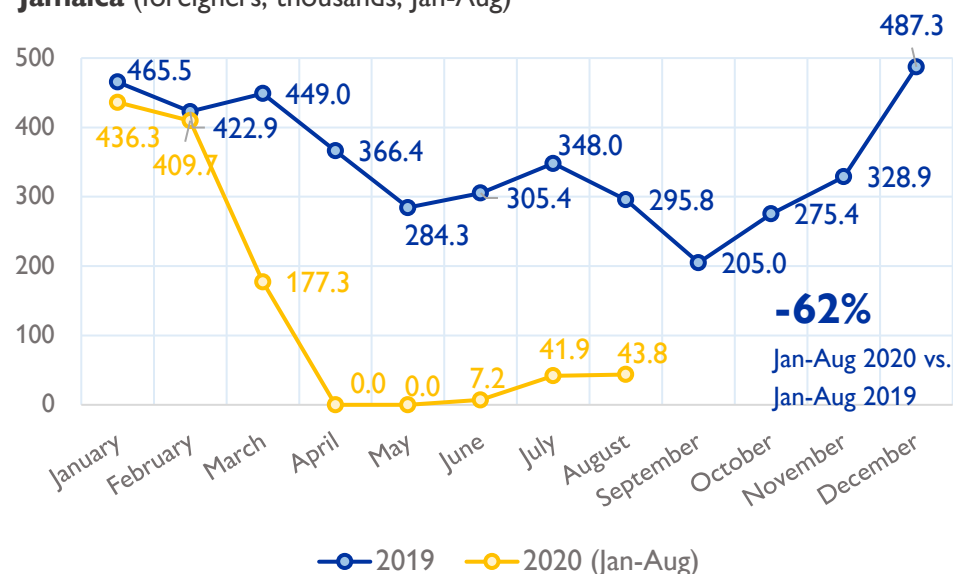
# RECENT CHANGES IN MOBILITY



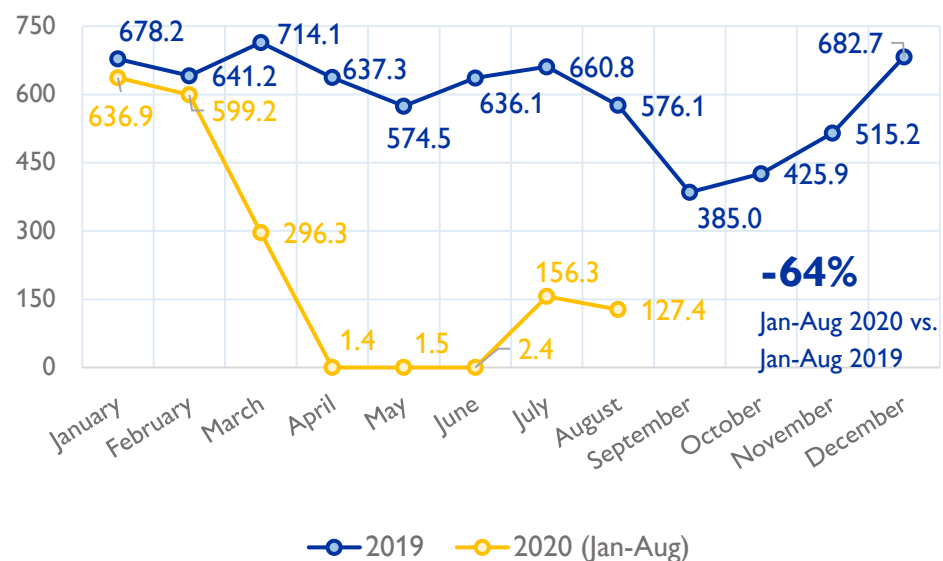
**Panama** (foreigners and nationals, thousands, Jan-Aug)



**Jamaica** (foreigners, thousands, Jan-Aug)



**Dominican Republic** (foreigners and nationals, thousands, Jan-Aug)



In the first eight months of 2020, there was a significant decrease in human mobility throughout the region, beginning in March. This decline in mobility coincided with the introduction of [travel restrictions](#) imposed by various countries in the region in order to contain the outbreak of COVID-19. A slight increase may be observed in the number of entries / arrivals registered between June and August 2020 (where updated public data are available) in countries where restrictions have been lifted or lessened.

Sources: United States - National Travel and Tourism Office, *Non-Resident Arrivals to the United States*, n.d.; Canada - Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), *International Tourists Entering or Returning to Canada, by Province of Entry*, n.d.; Mexico - Migration Policy Unit, *Boletín Mensual de Estadísticas Migratorias 2019 y 2020*, 2020; Costa Rica - General Directorate of Migration and Foreigners, *Informes Estadísticos Anuales 2019 y 2020*; Panama - National Migration Service, *Migración - Movimiento Migratorio Agosto 2020*, n.d.; Jamaica Tourist Board, *Monthly Statistical Report August 2020*, 2020; Dominican Republic - Central Bank, *Llegada vía aérea, Total (según residencia y aeropuertos)*, n.d. [10 Oct. 2020].

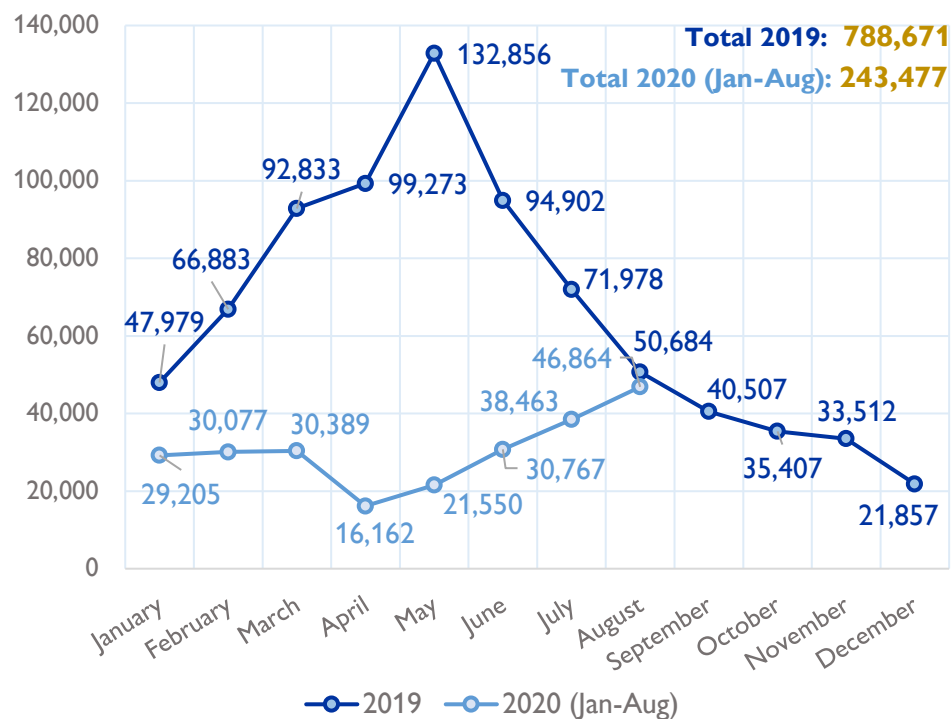


# MIGRANT APPREHENSIONS



## United States

**Figure 2: Monthly migrant apprehensions<sup>1</sup> reported on the Southwest United States border, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug)**

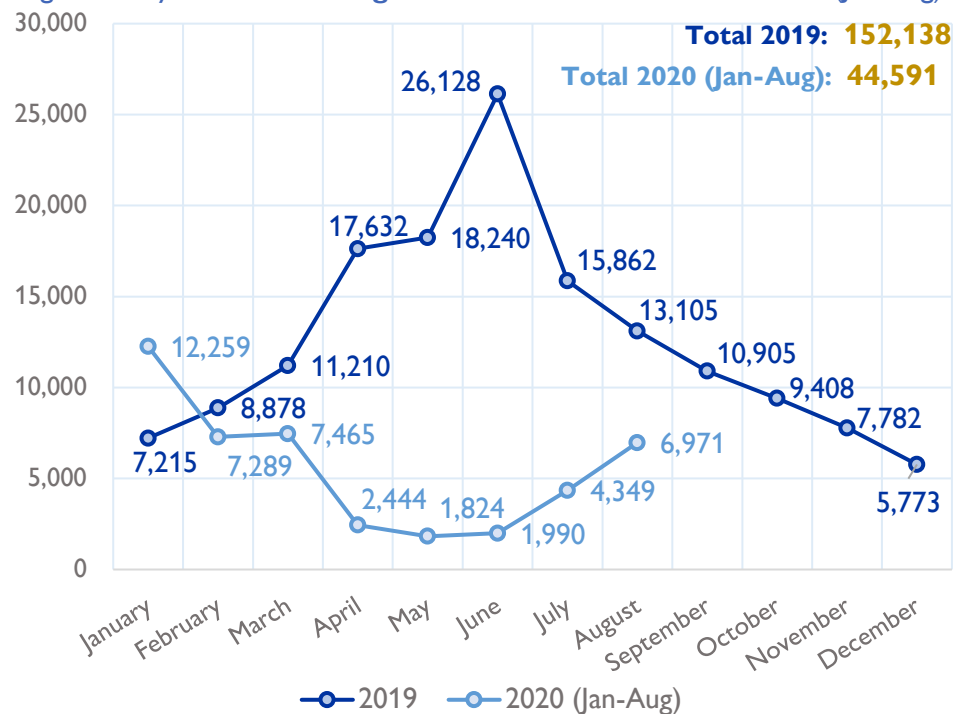


After a 47 per cent decrease in migrant apprehensions recorded on the southwestern United States border between March and April 2020, the number of monthly apprehensions began to increase again, and in August 2020 reflected levels similar to the same month in 2019. In any year, most migrants apprehended at the United States-Mexico border originate from Mexico and countries of Northern Central America (Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador).

Source: United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP) (Department of Homeland Security), *Southwest Border Migration FY 2020*, n.d. [07 Oct. 2020]. <sup>1</sup>Note: Beginning in March 2020, statistics on apprehensions include both **Title 8** Apprehensions (detentions or inadmissibles processed under the authority of CBP) and **Title 42** Expulsions (individuals expelled to the country of last transit or home country in the interest of public health) (data for 2020 are provisional and are subject to change).

## Mexico

**Figure 3: Apprehensions<sup>2</sup> of migrants originating from countries of Northern Central America (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador) registered by Mexican immigration authorities, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug)**



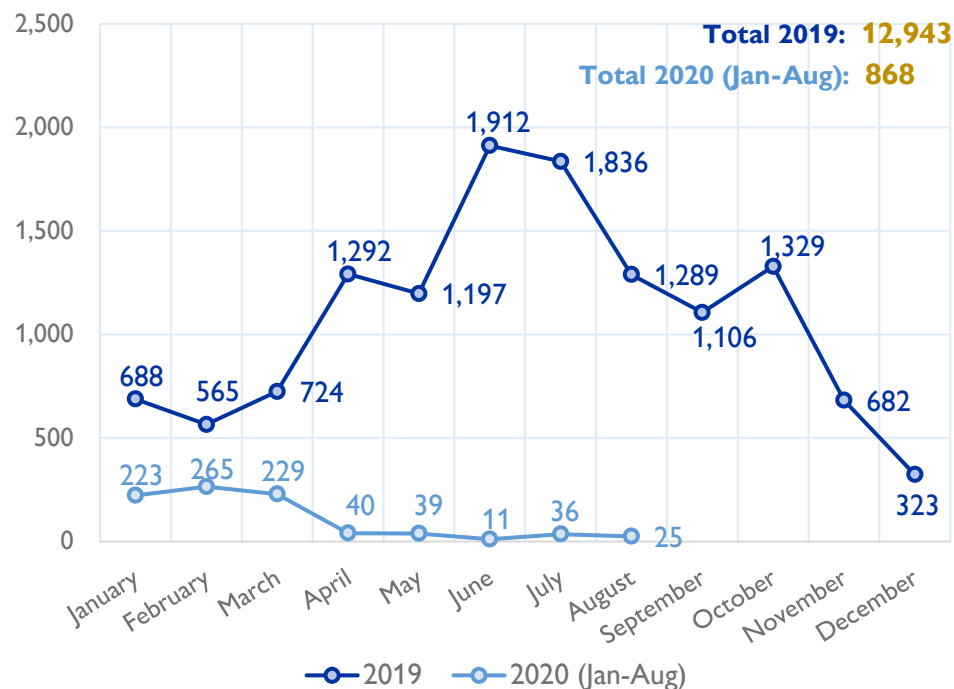
The number of apprehensions of migrants originating from Northern Central America reported by Mexican immigration authorities increased by more than 112 per cent in January 2020 compared with December 2019. After a notable decrease between March and May 2020, the number of registered apprehensions began to increase again between May and August 2020.

Source: Migration Policy Unit, Registry and Identity of People (Mexican Secretariat of the Interior), *Eventos de extranjeros presentados ante la autoridad migratoria, según continente y país de nacionalidad, 2019 and 2020*, n.d. [07 Oct. 2020]. <sup>2</sup>Note: apprehensions data are based on information recorded in migrant centers, central and local offices of the National Institute of Migration, and correspond to events rather than individuals (i.e. the same individual could have been apprehended more than once) (data for 2020 are provisional and are subject to change).



## Mexico

**Figure 4: Apprehensions<sup>3</sup> of extracontinental migrants** (originating from countries in Africa and Asia) registered by Mexican immigration authorities, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug)

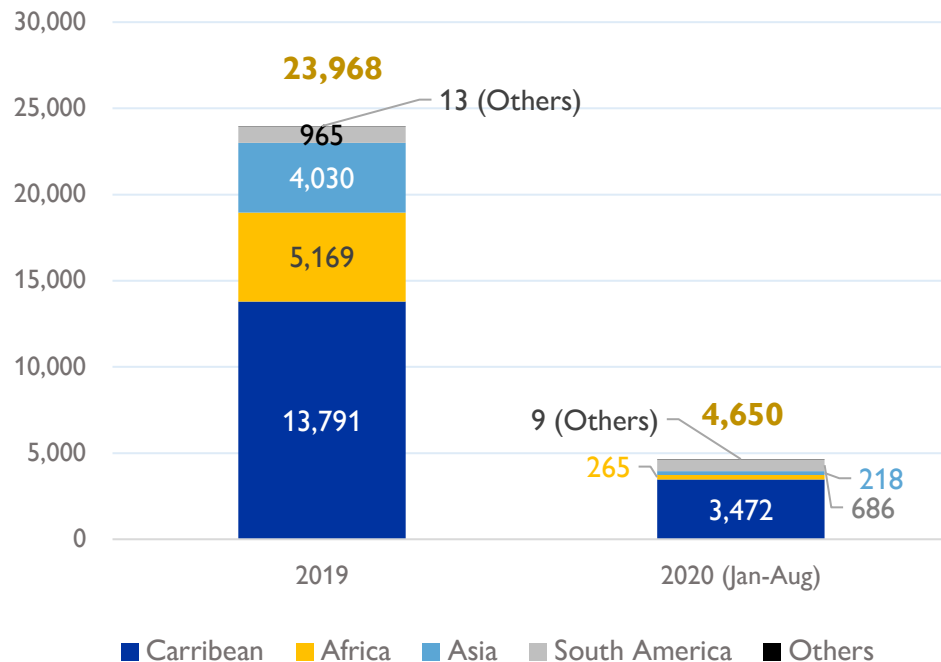


Apprehensions of extracontinental migrants registered by Mexican immigration authorities began to decline progressively beginning in mid-2019. Data for 2020 reflect the same trend. The number of apprehensions declined by 83 per cent between March and April 2020, until only 11 apprehensions of extracontinental migrants were registered in June 2020 – a significant decrease considering that nearly 2,000 encounters were registered in June 2019.

Source: Migration Policy Unit, Registry and Identity of People (Mexican Secretariat of the Interior), *Eventos de extranjeros presentados ante la autoridad migratoria, según continente y país de nacionalidad, 2019* and *2020*, n.d. [07 Oct. 2020]. <sup>3</sup> **Note:** apprehensions data are based on information recorded in migrant centers, central and local offices of the National Institute of Migration, and correspond to events rather than individuals (i.e. the same individual could have been apprehended more than once) (data for 2020 are provisional and are subject to change).

## Panama

**Figure 5: Caribbean and extrarregional migrants identified in irregular transit in the southern zone of Panama (Darién Gap), 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug), by region of origin<sup>4</sup>**



Between January 2019 and August 2020, the main countries of origin of migrants identified in irregular transit in the southern zone of Panama were: Haiti (13,860), Cuba (3,397), Cameroon (2,251), India (2,116), Congo (1,345), Bangladesh (1,108) and Chile (939), followed by several other Asian, African and South American countries. Nationals of the seven aforementioned countries constituted 87.4 per cent of all migrants identified in irregular transit in this area during this 20-month period.

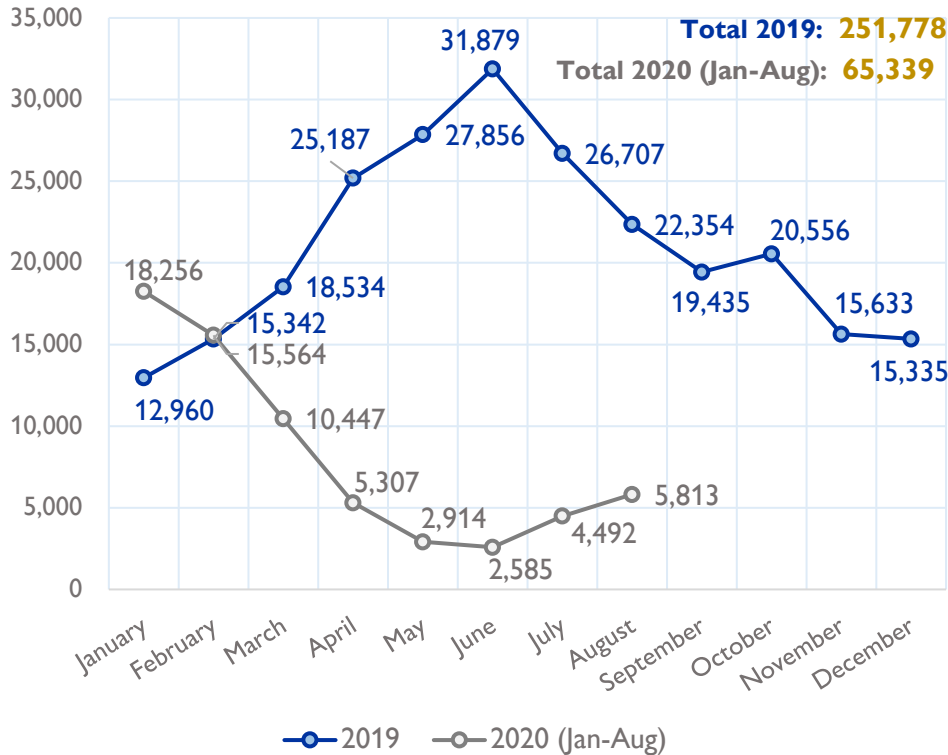
Source: Panama National Migration Service, *MIGRACIÓN – Irregulares en tránsito por Darién December 2019 y October 2020*, 2019 y 2020 [19 Nov. 2020]. <sup>4</sup> **Note:** data were not registered in April, May and July 2020 due to closures related to COVID-19. Figures are preliminary as of 31 October 2020 and are subject to change. The total for Caribbean migrants includes only Haitians and Cubans given that other Caribbean nationalities were not identified in this period.



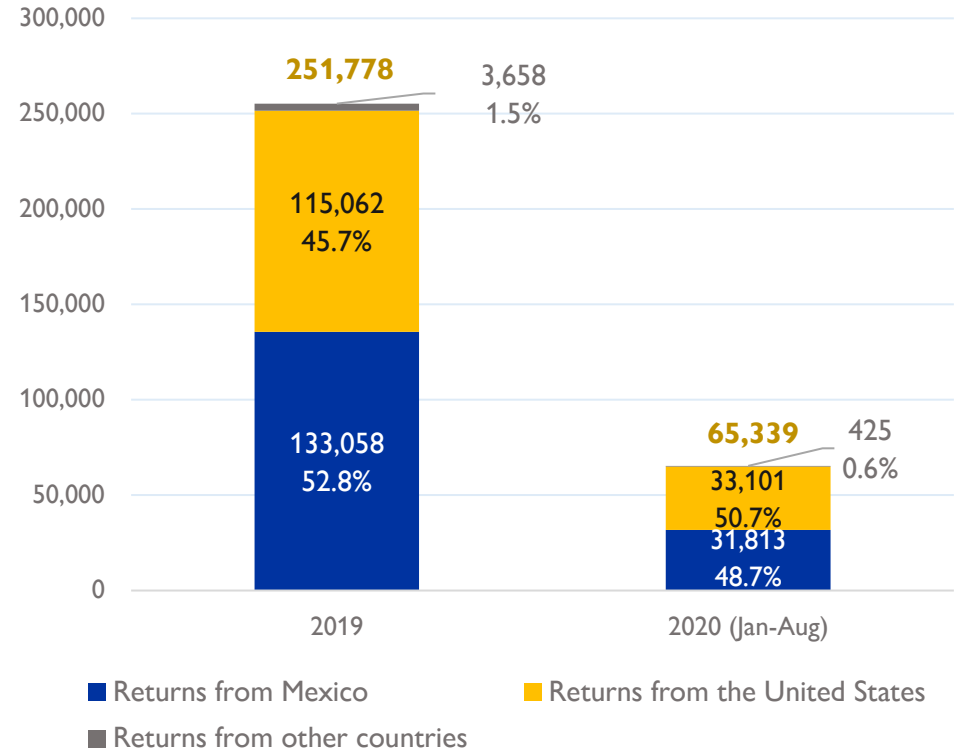
# MIGRANT RETURNS



**Figure 6: Migrant returns to Northern Central America (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador) from Mexico and the United States, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug)<sup>5</sup>**



**Figure 7: Migrant returns to Northern Central America (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador), by country of departure, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug)<sup>6</sup>**



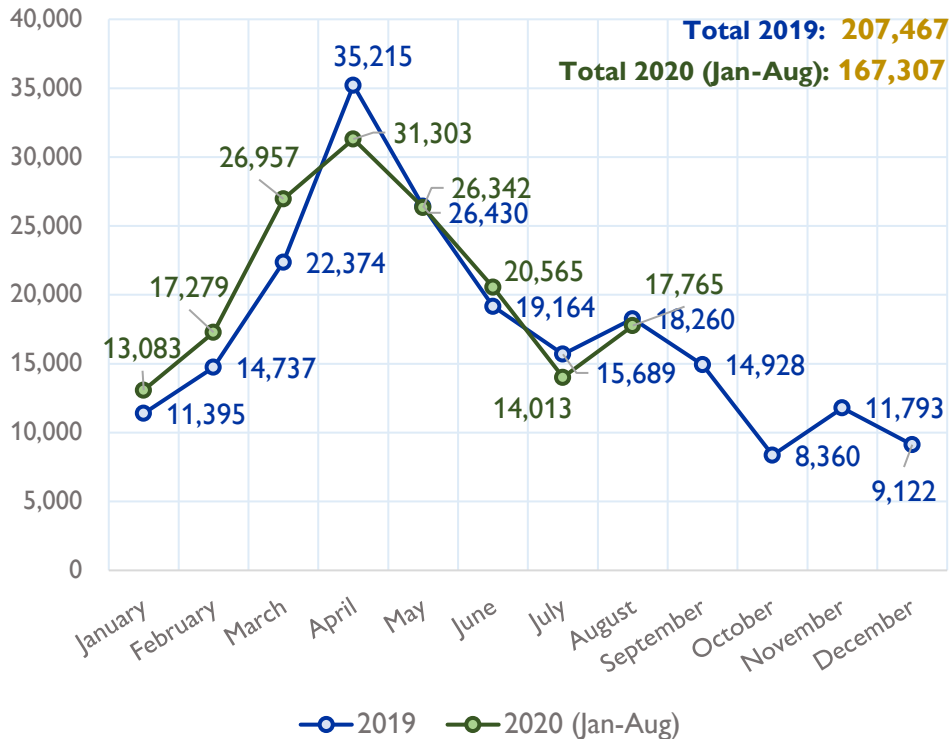
The number of migrant returns to countries of Northern Central America recorded in January 2020 represented the highest figure registered for the month of January in the past four years. However, between March and June there was a significant decrease in the number of recorded returns, with a slight rebound in July and August. During the first eight months of 2020, 115,480 fewer migrant returns were registered in Northern Central America compared with the same period in 2019, representing a 64.3 per cent decline. Of the 65,339 migrants who returned to Northern Central America between January and August 2020, 8,071 (12.4%) returned to El Salvador, 29,261 (44.8%) to Guatemala and 28,046 (42.9%) to Honduras.

Source: Northern Triangle Migration Information Management Initiative (NTMI) (IOM), *Returning Migrants to the NTCA / January - August 2020*, n.d. [10 Oct. 2020]. <sup>5</sup>Note: Figures on migrant returns are based on administrative data maintained by countries in Northern Central America and include repatriated migrants and assisted returns (data are subject to changes based on monthly updates to the source).

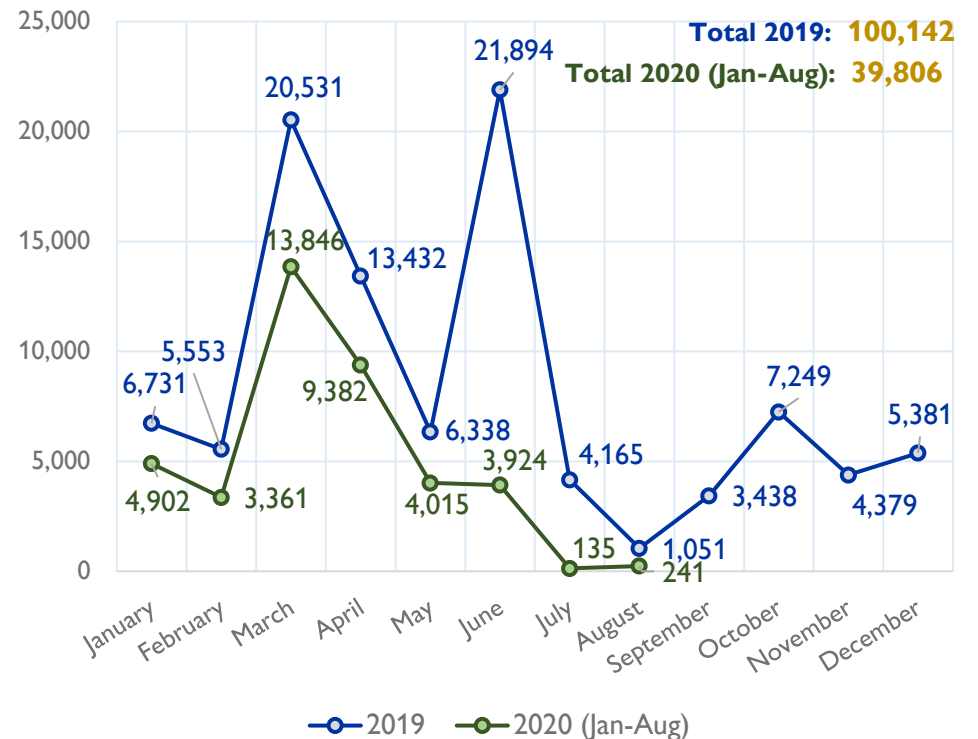
Source: Northern Triangle Migration Information Management Initiative (NTMI) (IOM), *Returning Migrants to the NTCA / January - August 2020*, n.d. [10 Oct. 2020]. <sup>6</sup>Note: Figures on migrant returns are based on administrative data maintained by countries in Northern Central America and include repatriated migrants and assisted returns (data are subject to changes based on monthly updates to the source).



**Figure 8: H-2A visas** (temporary agricultural workers) issued in the United States, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug)



**Figure 9: H-2B visas** (non-agricultural temporary workers) issued in the United States, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug)



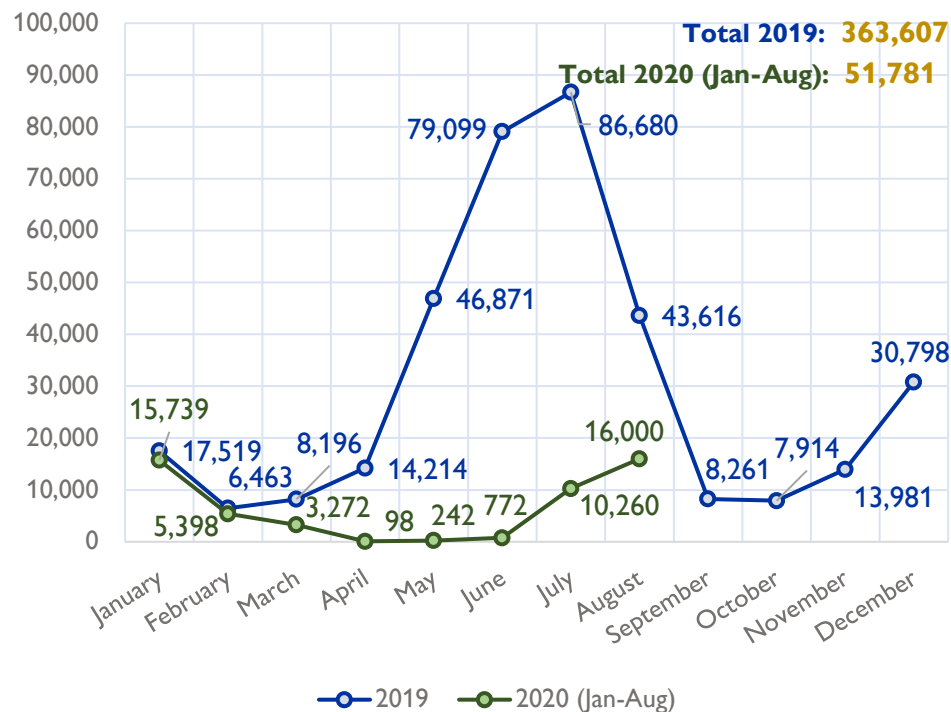
- In the four fiscal years from 2016 to 2019, the number of H-2A temporary agricultural visas issued in the United States increased by almost 53 per cent. In the first eight months of 2020, there was a 2.5 per cent increase in the number of H-2A visas issued compared to the same period during the previous year (167,307 from Jan-Aug 2020, vs. 163,264 during this period in 2019). Between January 2019 and August 2020, nationals of Mexico (344,589, or 92% of H-2A visas issued in this period), Jamaica (9,136), Guatemala (4,560), Nicaragua (1,228) and Honduras (501) were the principal recipients of H-2A visas in the region.
- In the first eight months of 2020, the number of H-2B visas issued fell by 50.1 per cent compared to the same period in 2019. Between January 2019 and August 2020, nationals of Mexico (104,998, or 75% of H-2B visas issued in this period), Jamaica (14,184), Guatemala (3,665), Honduras (1,499) and El Salvador (733) were the principal recipients of H-2B visas in the region. The main sectors of employment for H-2B workers are: groundskeeping and landscaping (approximately 40% of the total), forestry (approximately 8%), followed by jobs in amusement / recreation, hospitality, meat / fish processing, construction and restaurant work.

Source: Bureau of Consular Affairs (U.S. Department of State), *Monthly Nonimmigrant Visa Issuance Statistics*, n.d. [10 Oct. 2020].

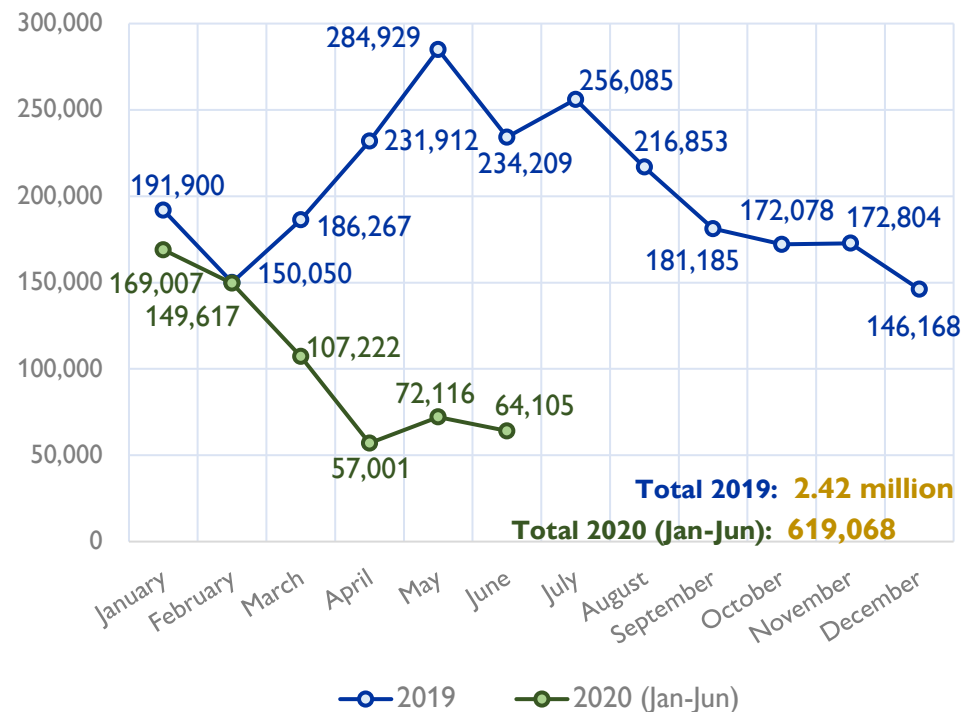
Source: Bureau of Consular Affairs (U.S. Department of State), *Monthly Nonimmigrant Visa Issuance Statistics*, n.d. [10 Oct. 2020].



**Figure 10: F1 visas** (students enrolled in academic programs) issued in the United States, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug)



**Figure 11: New applications and extensions** approved for temporary residents in Canada, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Jun)



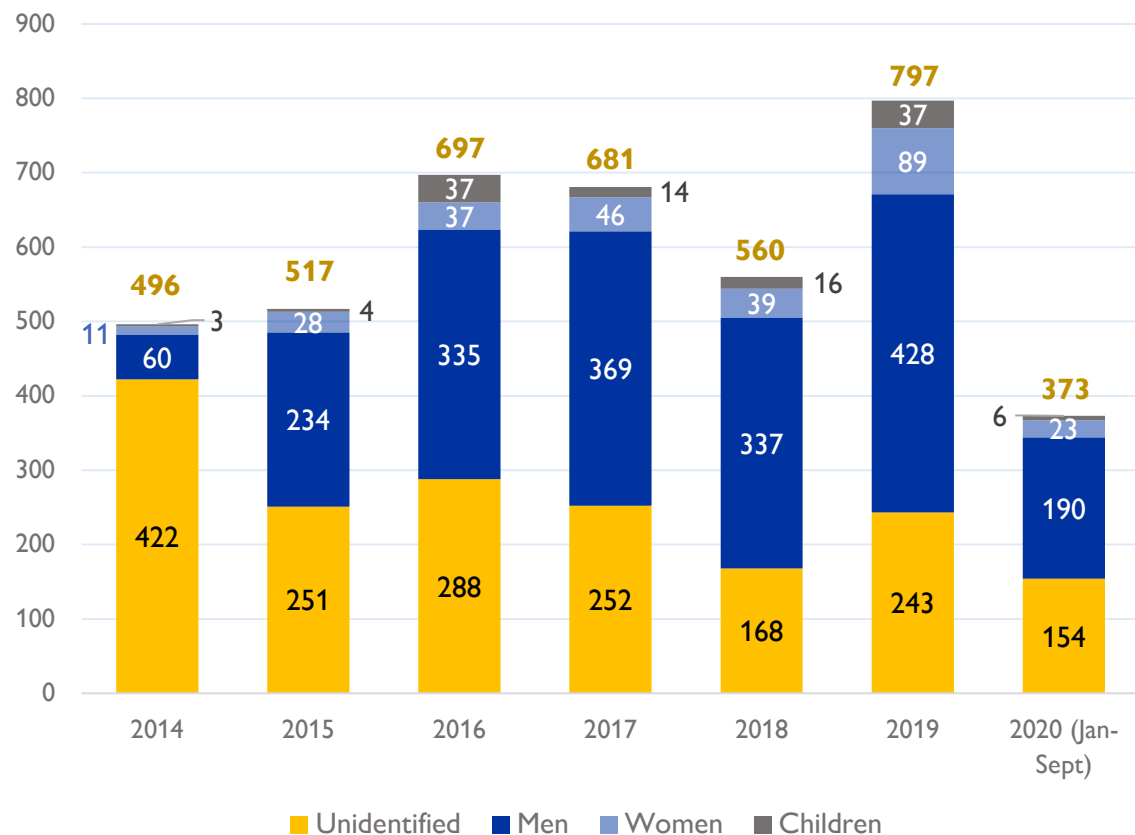
- In the first eight months of 2020, the number of F1 visas issued in the United States fell by 82.9 per cent compared to the same period in 2019. In total, 1.94 million non-immigrant visas (which include 19 classes of visas, including H-2A, H-2B and F1) were issued in the United States in the first eight months of 2020. This represents a significant decrease compared to previous years. For example, in the first eight months of 2019, 6.1 million non-immigrant visas were issued, representing more than triple the amount issued in this period in 2020.
- The number of new temporary residency applications and extensions (which include temporary resident visas, visitor registrations, study permits, work permits, extensions and more) approved by Canada decreased by 52 per cent in the first semester (Jan-Jun) of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019, by 53 per cent compared to the same period in 2018, and by 43 per cent compared to the first semester of 2017. Between January and June 2020, nationals of Mexico (30,474), Jamaica (14,502), Guatemala (9,252), the United States (7,492) and Haiti (4,262) were the main recipients of temporary Canadian residence visas in the region.

Source: Bureau of Consular Affairs (U.S. Department of State), *Monthly Nonimmigrant Visa Issuance Statistics*, n.d. [10 Oct. 2020].

Source: Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), *New Applications and Extensions Approved by IRCC for Temporary Residents (in Persons), by Month*, n.d. [10 Oct. 2020].



**Figure 12:** Missing migrants identified in North America, Central America and the Caribbean, 2014-2020 (Jan-Sept)<sup>7</sup>



**Table 1:** Missing migrants identified in North America, Central America and the Caribbean, by subregion, 2020 (Jan-Sept)

<b>United States – Mexico Border</b>	<b>252</b>
<b>Caribbean</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Central America</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>North America</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>373</b>

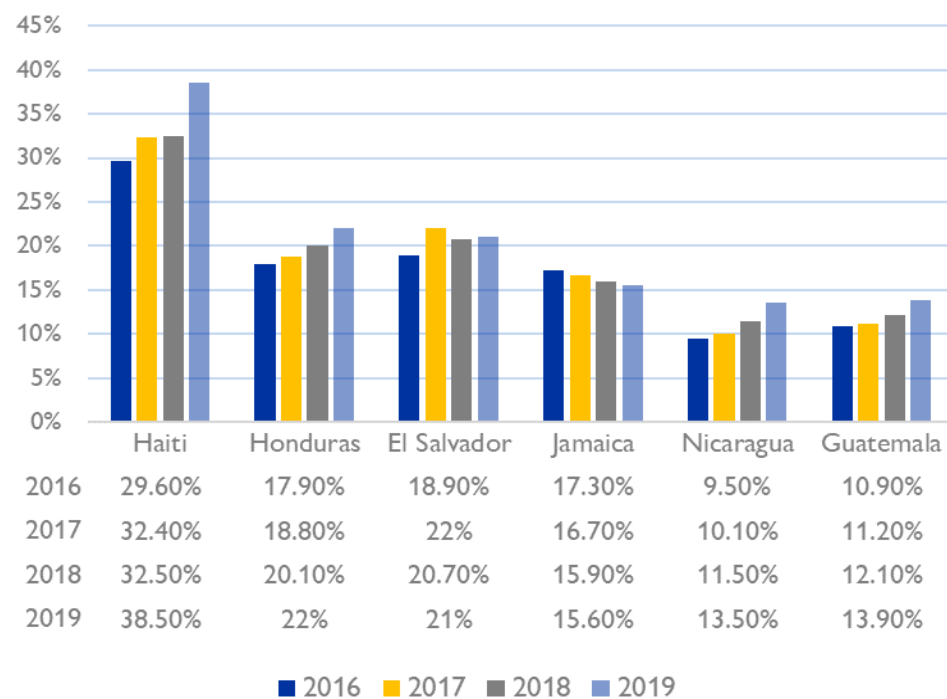
Source: IOM, *Missing Migrants Project: Americas*, n.d. [21 Sept. 2020].

<sup>7</sup>Note: data in Figure 12 and Table 1 are up-to-date as of 21 September 2020. It should be noted that, in the Central America, North America and Caribbean region, there are zones where it is difficult to achieve an accurate count of missing and deceased migrants, and incidents may be undercounted. Little is known about the deaths of migrants on remote or less populated routes, such as the Darien Gap region on the land border between Colombia and Panama, or on maritime routes, including the “Mona Passage” between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico.

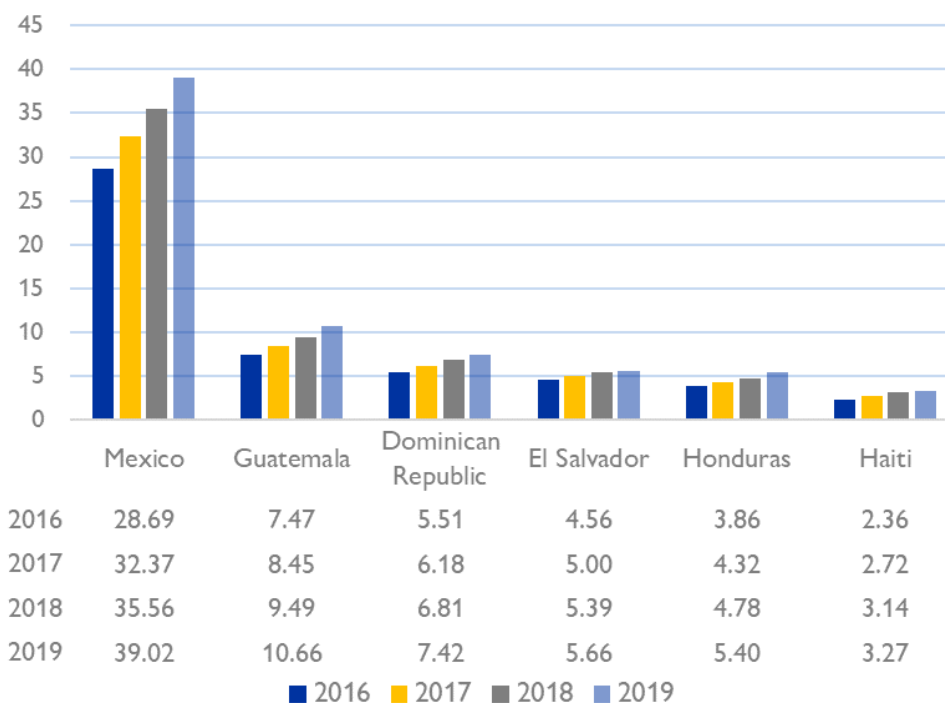
- [IOM's Missing Migrants Project](#) collects data from various sources (including from coast guards and medical examiners, and other sources such as media reports, NGOs, and surveys and interviews of migrants, amongst others), to track migrants who have died or gone missing during their migration journeys to a different country. From 2014 to 21 September 2020, more than 4,000 died during their migration journeys in the region. About 65 per cent of these identified deaths were documented on the U.S.-Mexico border.
- Despite mobility restrictions and border closures established in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, migrants continue to embark on dangerous and potentially life-threatening migration journeys. Hundreds of migrant deaths were recorded in region in the first eight months of 2020.



**Figure 13: Top remittance-receiving countries in Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean, in % of GDP, where remittances exceed 10% of GDP (2016-2019)**



**Figure 14: Top remittance-receiving countries in Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean, in USD billions, where remittances exceed USD 3 billion (2016-2019)**



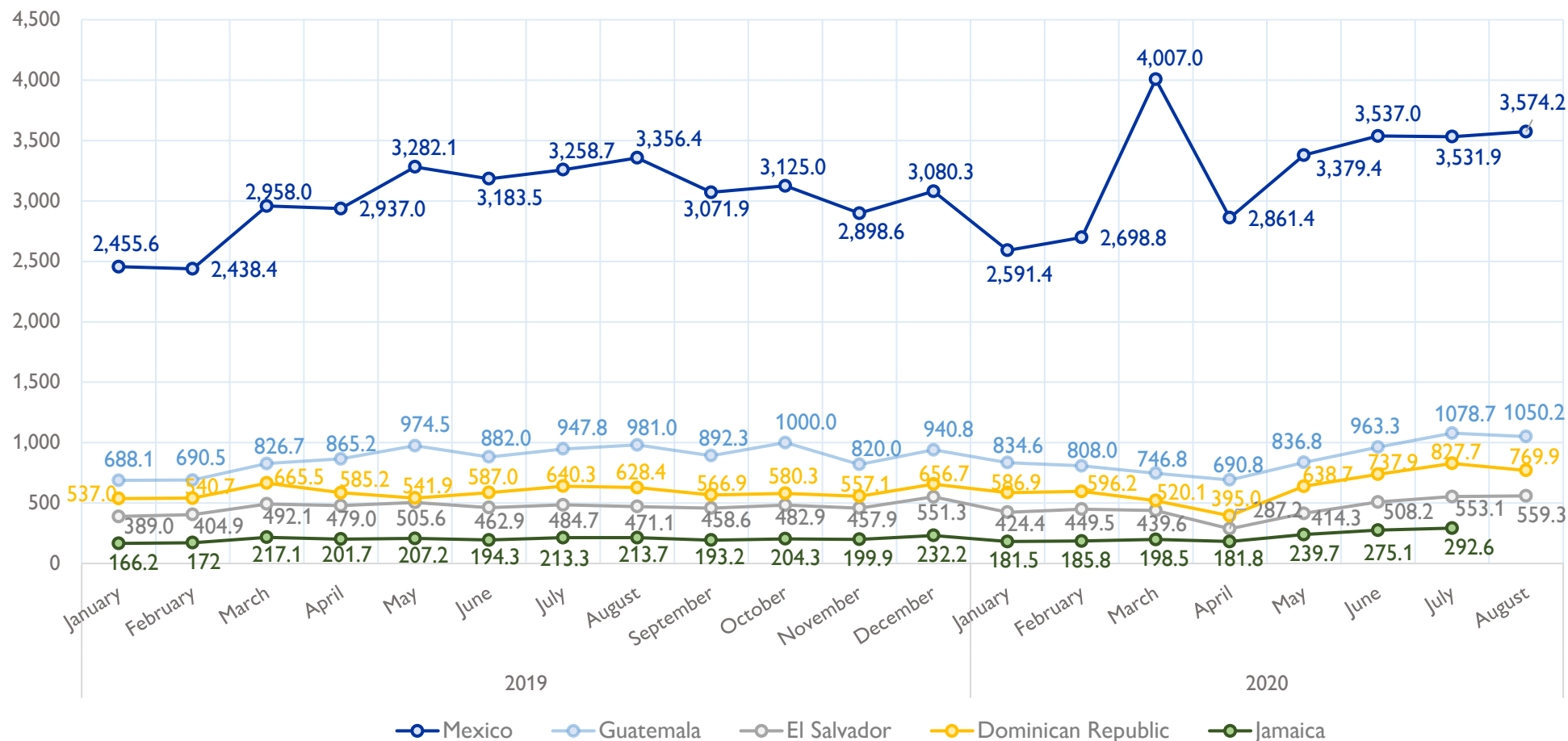
Remittances are a fundamental support and insurance mechanism for migrant families in countries of origin. The COVID-19 pandemic has generated concerns both regionally and globally regarding the capacities of migrants to send remittances home, given the strong socioeconomic impacts of this crisis in migrant destination countries. These concerns are elevated in recipient countries with a strong and sometimes growing dependency on remittances. Remittances reached the equivalent of 10 per cent or more, and in a few countries more than 20 per cent of GDP in 2019 (see Figure 13). Although remittances constitute a smaller proportion compared to the total GDP in some other countries of origin in the region – for example, the Dominican Republic, or Mexico, which has the third highest rate of migrant remittances inflows in the world and received more than USD 39 billion in remittances in 2019 – inflows remain high in absolute terms (see Figure 14).

Source: World Bank, *Personal remittances, received (% of GDP)*, n.d. [10. Oct 2020].

Source: World Bank, *Personal remittances, received (current US\$)*, n.d. [10. Oct 2020].



**Figure 15:** Monthly remittance flows to selected countries (with available data) in the region, 2019 and 2020 (Jan-Aug), in USD millions



Overall, remittances received in certain top remittance-receiving countries in the region (where monthly data are available) did not exhibit a drastic decline in the first seven or eight months of 2020. In contrast, remittances received in Mexico in the first eight months of 2020 registered an increase of 9.68 per cent compared to the same period in 2019. In Guatemala, the Dominican Republic and El Salvador, after a considerable decrease in March and April, remittance flows rebounded in May. In total, remittances received in Guatemala during the first eight months of 2020 exceeded by 2.2 per cent the amount of remittances received during the same period in 2019, while in Jamaica they increased by 13.6 per cent in the first seven months and by 7.3 per cent in the Dominican Republic compared to the first eight months of 2019. In El Salvador, remittances received fell by 1.5 per cent in the first eight months of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019.

Sources: Bank of Mexico, *Ingresos por Remesas*, n.d.; Bank of Guatemala, *Ingreso de Divisas por Remesas Familiares*, n.d.; Central Reserve Bank of El Salvador, *Ingresos Mensuales de Remesas Familiares*, n.d.; Central Bank of the Dominican Republic, *Remesas Familiares – Mensual*, n.d.; Bank of Jamaica – *Remittance Update April 2020*, 2020 [10 Oct. 2020] (data are subject to change).