

Fact Sheet: Changes in Migrant Demographics at the Southwest Border

Since the summer of 2021, there has been a shift in the demographics of arriving migrants at the Southwest border. Available border data shows a dramatic increase in migrant arrivals fleeing authoritarian regimes in Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, and a relative decrease in arrivals from more traditional sending countries like Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

Even as overall monthly encounters at the border have remained relatively stable, this demographic shift has had a major policy impact. This fact sheet will describe and visualize the changing dynamics at the border and their implications for asylum seekers, receiving communities, and border policy.

What is an encounter at the border?

This fact sheet will be relying on U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) [data](#) on migrant encounters at the Southwest border.

Encounters occur when the government processes a migrant who has attempted to cross into the U.S. without authorization. Encounters can occur at official ports of entry or between ports along the border, and the term refers both to those apprehended attempting to evade detection and to those who have turned themselves to pursue claims for asylum or other humanitarian protection under U.S. law. Encounters can occur under [Title 8](#), in which migrants are held in custody or placed on [alternatives to detention](#) as they pursue removal and/or asylum claims in immigration court, or under [Title 42](#), in which migrants are immediately expelled to Mexico or their home country without an opportunity to make a claim for humanitarian protection.

Importantly, the number of encounters is [not synonymous](#) with the overall number of individuals attempting to enter at the border without authorization. Encounter totals do not account for those who evade detection by Border Patrol (so-called “got aways”). Encounter data can also be inflated because it counts migrants who attempt to cross again and again in quick succession as separate encounters. Got-away rates have [declined](#) in recent years, while repeat-crossing or “recidivism” rates are [near](#) record highs.

What demographic shifts have occurred at the border in Fiscal Year 2022?

In Fiscal Year 2022, the number of border encounters from Colombia, Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua [increased dramatically](#). While some months saw more significant increases than others, the numbers generally climbed throughout the year. These

increases occurred even as migration from other countries declined over the same period.

Demographic Shift (September 2021 – September 2022)

Country of Origin	September 2021 Encounters	September 2022 Encounters	Percent Change
Colombia	2,248	14,391	+540%
Cuba	4,812	26,178	+444%
Venezuela	10,814	33,804	+213%
Nicaragua	7,298	18,199	+149%
All other	166,829	135,559	-19%

Source: [CBP Data](#)

Across all of FY 2022, migration from these four countries [accounted](#) for 722,979 total encounters, or 30% of all border encounters. That total exceeds the proportion of arrivals from the Northern Triangle countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, which have accounted for a significant proportion of overall encounters in recent years. Migration from the Northern Triangle amounted to 541,618 encounters in FY 2022, or just 23% of all encounters at the border.

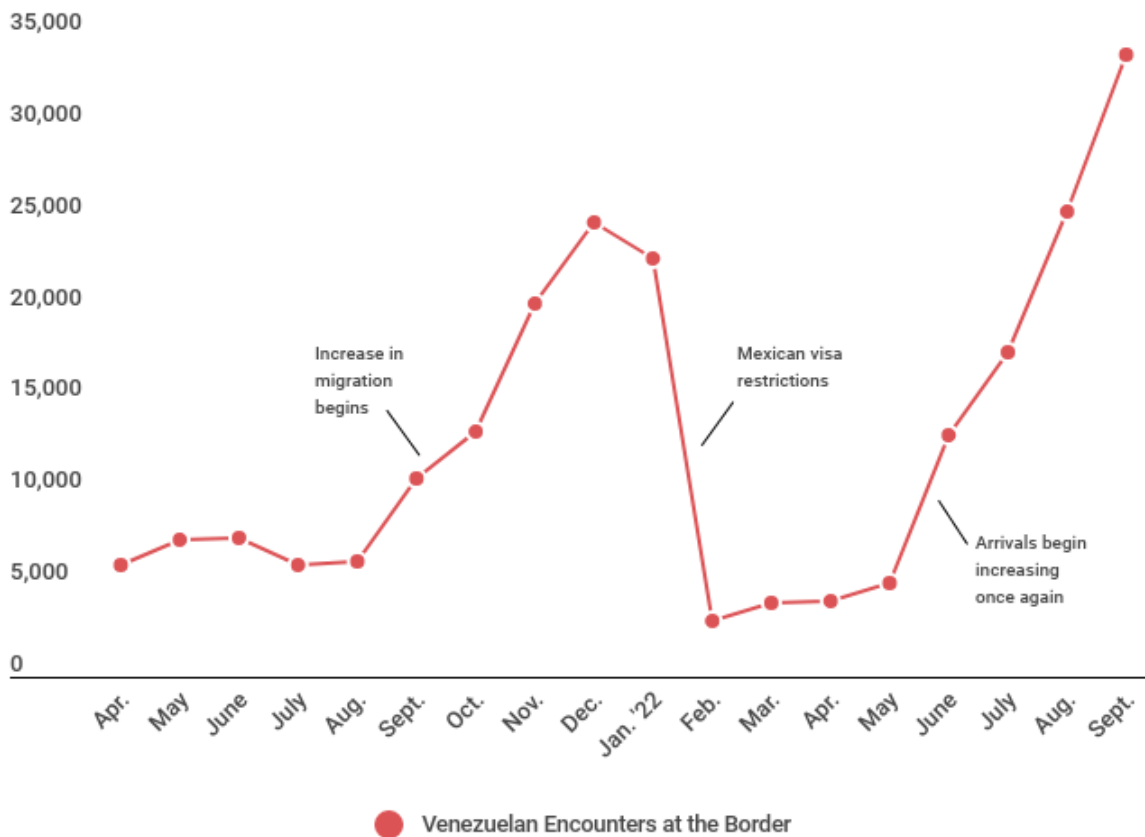
How has migration from Venezuela changed over the course of FY 2022?

Rising numbers of arriving Venezuelan migrants have gained [particular media attention](#) in the summer and fall of 2022 – and for good reason. It used to be normal to see under 100 total Venezuelans encountered each month at the Southwest border. But CBP data [shows](#) that in August 2022, there were 25,349 encounters of Venezuelans. That is a 302% increase from August 2021 even as overall encounters declined during the same period. It's about a 52,000% increase from August 2020, when just 49 total Venezuelan encounters were recorded. The number of Venezuelan arrivals increased again in September 2022 to 33,961.

The increase in Venezuelan encounters initially began in September 2021, when many migrants fleeing the Maduro regime were able to easily enter Mexico (often by air) and make their way to the U.S. border. However, after Mexico [enacted visa restrictions](#) on Venezuelans in January 2022, the number of Venezuelans arriving at the border briefly [plummeted](#) – declining from 22,779 to 3,072 in just one month.

But arrivals soon began to rise again, as Venezuelans began the journey on foot through Mexico and to the U.S. border. These individuals are among the poorest and most vulnerable fleeing insecurity in Venezuela, those desperate enough to brave the Darién Gap, a 60+ mile jungle footpath that remains one of the [most dangerous migratory routes](#) in the world.

Venezuelan Migration April 2021 – September 2022



Source: [CBP Data](#)

How have these demographic changes impacted immigration court processes and Title 42 expulsions?

Unlike migrants arriving from Mexico and the Northern Triangle, migrants from Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Colombia have typically not been expelled under Title 42 and instead allowed to stay in the U.S. to pursue asylum claims in immigration court under Title 8.

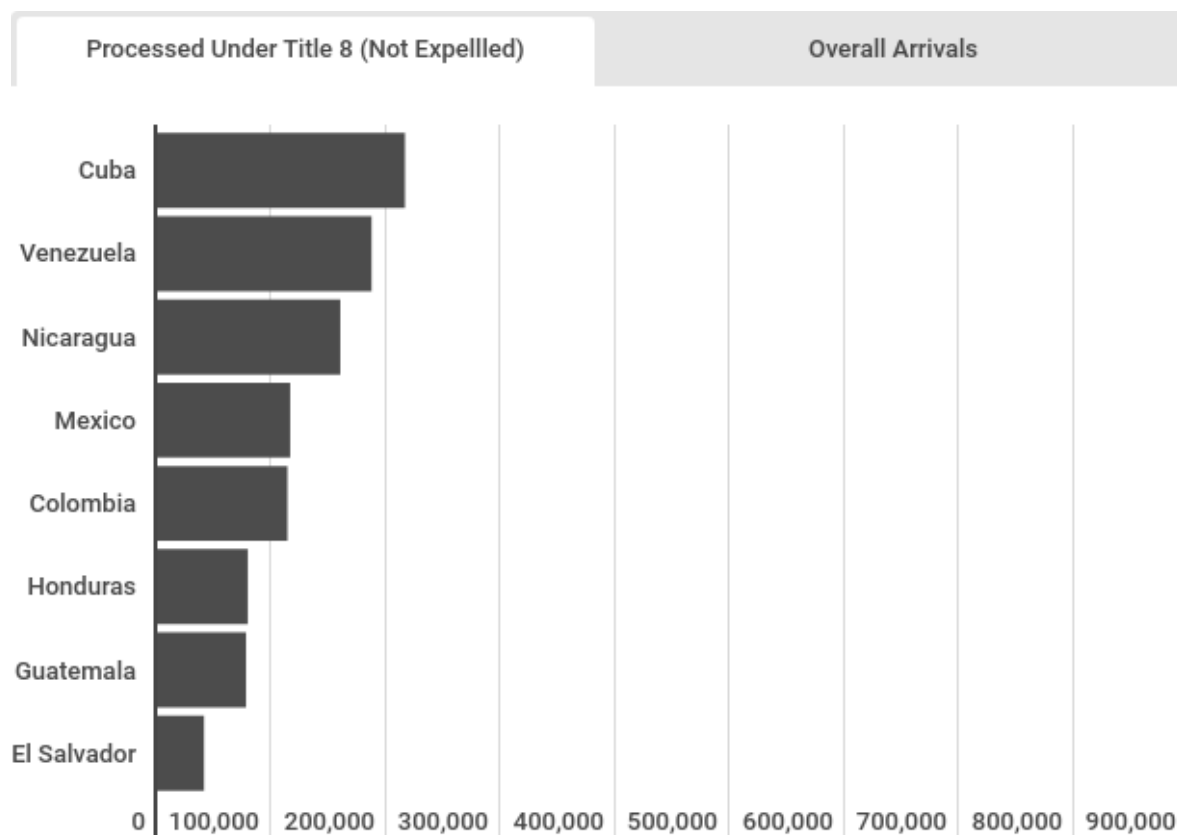
[Title 42](#) is a pandemic-era policy that both the Trump and Biden administrations have used to immediately expel arriving migrants to Mexico or their countries of origin. Migrants expelled under Title 42 are not provided the opportunity to make claims for

asylum under U.S. law. The use of Title 42 relies heavily on receiving countries agreeing to the rapid expulsions.

In Fiscal Year 2022, arrivals from Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua were almost entirely exempt from Title 42 expulsions due to Mexico’s refusal to accept them and the lack of a working diplomatic relationship between the Biden administration and the governments in question. Colombians have also largely been exempted from Title 42 as the country has only agreed to receive a limited number of expulsion flights.

As a result, migrants from these four countries make up a very large proportion of those allowed to stay in the U.S. and pursue asylum claims under Title 8. In fact, those from Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua accounted for the three most common nationalities of migrants *not* expelled under Title 42.

Migrants Allowed to Pursue Claims in Immigration Court (FY 2022)



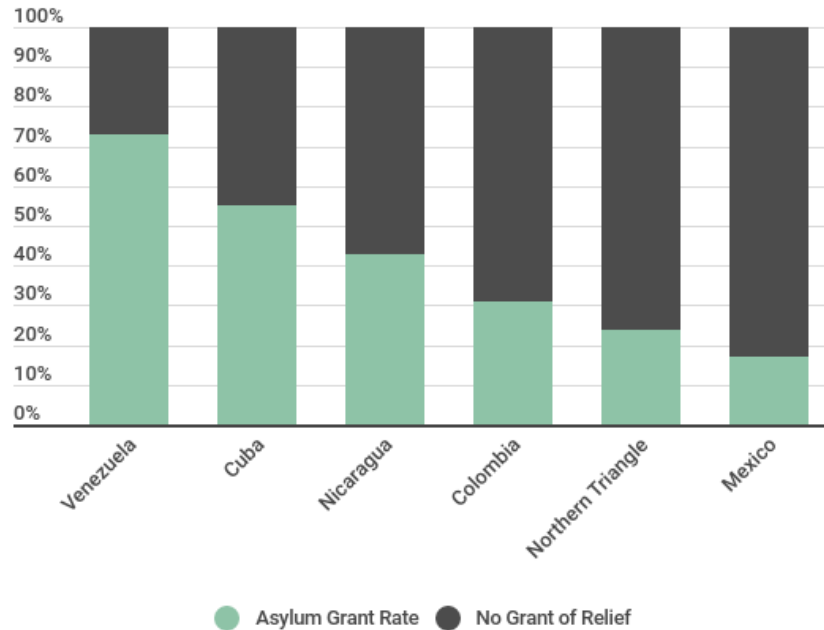
Source: [CBP Data](#)

What are the policy implications of these demographic changes?

The increase in arrivals from Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Colombia — combined with the fact that migrants from these countries were largely exempt from Title 42 expulsions in FY 2022 — have had a series of policy ramifications:

- Unlike other arriving migrants, Cuban arrivals are eligible for additional assistance from the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) through the Cuban Haitian Entrance Program (CHEP). Refugee resettlement agencies are responsible for delivering this assistance and have needed [emergency financial assistance](#) to respond to the sudden additional need in FY 2022.
- Many Venezuelan arrivals have been caught up in high profile [migrant transportation schemes](#) to northern cities and localities. In an effort to curb irregular migration from Venezuela, on October 12 the Biden administration [announced](#) a limited Venezuelan parole program and an agreement with Mexico to expand Title 42 to Venezuelans. Preliminary data [suggests](#) the policies have at least temporarily reduced Venezuelan arrivals. These policies have also raised [significant concerns](#) related to the safety of migrants returned under Title 42 and whether the parole program is accessible enough to serve as a real alternative to forced migration.
- Migrants from Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Colombia have historically been [more likely](#) to be granted asylum than applicants from other countries. Still, it is important to recognize that asylum remains a highly complex and difficult form of immigration relief to obtain. Without [access to legal counsel](#), arriving migrants from these four countries will struggle to produce sufficient evidence to support a particularized claim of asylum and immigration judges will not be sympathetic to generalized claims. Regardless, the result of these new asylum seekers' claims will not be known for several years due to the [lengthy backlog](#) in immigration court.

Asylum Case Success Rate by Nationality (FY 2021)



Source: [TRAC Data](#)

Are recent arrivals more likely to be single adults, family units, or unaccompanied children?

Migrant arrivals from Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Colombia are in general slightly more likely than average to be families and less likely than average to be unaccompanied children. A particularly high proportion of families are arriving from Colombia and Venezuela, at 47% and 35% respectively. However, most migrants from these countries – like the majority of arriving migrants overall – continue to be single adults.

Demographic Composition of Arriving Migrants (FY 2022)

Country of Origin	Single Adults	Family Units	Unaccompanied Children
Cuba	76%	23%	<1%
Venezuela	64%	35%	1%
Nicaragua	80%	18%	2%
Colombia	52%	47%	1%
All other	70%	21%	9%

Source: [CBP Data](#)

Are migrants arriving at official U.S. ports of entry or between them?

Nearly *all* Colombian, Venezuelan, Cuban and Nicaraguan migrants who arrived at the southwest land border in FY 2022 entered the U.S. at an unofficial land crossing point and were processed by border patrol. This disparity is largely because most official ports are either closed to asylum seekers or they lack capacity to process claims and have [unpredictable and years-long wait times](#) for presenting a claim.

Percentage of Arrivals Between and At Ports of Entry (FY 2022)

Nationality	USBP Processing (Between Ports)	OFO Processing (At Ports)
Colombia	99.5%	0.5%
Venezuela	99.8%	0.2%
Cuba	99.7%	0.3%
Nicaragua	99.8%	0.2%

Source: [CBP Data](#)

The National Immigration Forum would like to thank Alexandra Ciullo, Policy Intern, for her extensive contributions to this fact sheet.