

Trapped and Targeted: Gender-based violence against children at the U.S.-Mexico Border

Introduction

Many of the children fleeing their countries to seek safety in the United States are escaping severe forms of gender-based violence (GBV), including violence by gangs, child sexual abuse, and intra-familial violence. Rather than allow these children to seek protection in the United States, the Trump Administration is summarily turning them around at U.S. Ports of Entry and pushing them back into Mexico, despite the lack of government or civil society support for the returned children. As a result, thousands of girls and boys are living in fear in makeshift camps and tent cities without protection or support. Unaccompanied children are especially vulnerable to sexual violence, human trafficking, and exploitation by cartels and other criminal groups that control areas along the U.S. – Mexico border.

These vulnerabilities have been exacerbated under the COVID-19 pandemic, as rates of gender-based violence have increased and survivors face new barriers to accessing protection and support.

Gender-based violence and impunity are widespread in Mexico

Women and girls in Mexico experience extremely high rates of GBV. Approximately [66 percent of women in Mexico have experienced some form of violence](#), and 44 percent have been abused by a partner. Since 2015, rates of femicide [have increased 137 percent](#) and in many cases these murders [are accompanied by torture](#), mutilation, and sexual violence.

The vast majority of gender-based crimes in Mexico go unpunished due to widespread underreporting, corruption, and the failure of government institutions to effectively investigate and prosecute crimes. As many as [99 percent](#) of femicides result in impunity. Migrant women and children who are victims of GBV in Mexico face even greater barriers to accessing protection and justice, including fear of discrimination or deportation if they report violence.

Rates of GBV and violence against women and children along Mexico's northern border are especially high, due in large part to the presence of drug cartels and other organized criminal groups

- In 2016, the average homicide rate per capita in [35 Mexican border municipalities](#) was over four times the rate in the corresponding U.S. border counties. The border states of Sonora, Nuevo León, and Chihuahua had the [highest femicide rates](#) in the country, almost twice the rate of Mexico City.
- Femicide rates in Ciudad Juarez have been on the rise since 2019, and historical data show that girls and [young women are disproportionately targeted](#), with half of victims under the age of 19.
- In the border state of Tamaulipas, children face high rates of kidnappings and murder. From 2006 to 2014 at least [2,000 children were murdered or mutilated](#), and in the first five months of this year, [265 children](#) have already been reported missing.
- Children in Mexico's border regions are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and forced labor, in many cases [at the hands of organized criminal groups](#).

Harmful U.S. policies and the COVID-19 pandemic have increased the risk of GBV for women and children at the U.S.-Mexico border and further limited access to protection

- The U.S. Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) or “Remain in Mexico” policy has trapped women, children, and other vulnerable individuals at Mexico’s northern border, many in camps with [dangerous, overcrowded, and unsanitary conditions](#). Women and children in MPP are at high risk of gender-based and other forms of violence. There have been [over 1,000 reported cases](#) of rape, murder, kidnapping, and torture of migrants waiting in that program, many orchestrated by [criminal organizations](#) that control Mexico’s border region.
- Since the U.S. government issued an order on March 20, 2020 [to suspend the entry of certain individuals](#) under the pretext of COVID-19, tens of thousands of asylum seekers, including thousands of unaccompanied children, have been expelled from the U.S. without access to protection. Without formal reception programs for those returned, many are left in dangerous tent cities and at particular risk for GBV.
- [Rates of violence](#), including GBV, have increased in Mexico during COVID-19. Since mid-March [over 200 women and girls have been killed](#), a number [three times higher](#) than the average 80 femicides monthly reported.
- [Girls and boys are at high risk of abuse during COVID-related lockdowns](#) due to increased stress on caregivers, confinement to small living spaces, and lack of access to support systems. These risks are heightened for children trapped at Mexico’s northern border, many of whom are separated from family members or left alone due to kidnapping or other violence against a family member, confined in cramped camps or shelters, and unlikely to have extended family or other trusted adults nearby to turn to for help if they experience violence or abuse.
- With [increased need for GBV services amid the pandemic](#), many survivors have no access to protection or assistance due to the limited capacity of Mexican government institutions to respond. For example, some shelters run by the Mexican government temporarily stopped accepting migrants and asylum seekers in response to COVID-19, leaving victims of violence without options for safe shelter.

Recommendations to the U.S. Government

1. In accordance with federal and international law, stop expelling unaccompanied children and allow them a meaningful opportunity to present their protection claims. Immigration officials must comply with the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) and ensure that children have an opportunity to ask for protection and are not in immediate danger of trafficking or persecution.
2. Follow [measures to safeguard public health](#) in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic while also ensuring access to safety for those seeking protection in the United States.
3. Direct foreign aid to help the government and civil society in Mexico effectively respond to the COVID-19 crisis and to increasing GBV, including strengthening child protection systems and support services for survivors of violence.
4. Provide assistance to Mexico to develop support services unaccompanied children on its northern border.
5. Increase foreign aid to Central America and Mexico to address the root causes of migration and prevent and work with governments and civil society organizations to respond to GBV.

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