

Received: 15 May 2024 Accepted: 24 June 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/md.v3i3.3223>

Haitians at the Mexican-American Border

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Abstract

Since 2021, the city of Reynosa on the Mexican-American border has seen a dramatic change in the asylum-seeking population, primarily being composed of families from Central America to now being overwhelmingly Haitian. The authors have assisted with aid work and conducted research in Reynosa with the Haitian population as well as volunteers and educators who have worked with them. This article, based on our ethnographic research, examines the reasons for the increase in Haitian immigration, the experiences of these migrants both coming to and living at the Mexican-American border, and the treatment of the Haitians by the Mexican government and society. The research indicates some similar dynamics that Haitians face in comparison to other asylum seekers but also some unique challenges given the role of race at the border. The findings indicate that the often harsher experience of Haitian migrants is also intertwined with more restrictive border and migration policies based on national origin and wealth.

Keywords: Mexican-American border; Haitians; asylum; critical border studies

Introduction

With the start of the Trump Administration's Remain in Mexico policy in 2019, large groups of migrants were stranded at the Mexican American border. Theoretically, the agreement between Mexico and the United States was going to provide resources to these individuals, but instead it led to individuals living on the streets in crime and cartel infested territory (McCorkle, 2020). The first author worked alongside these migrants in the border camp of Matamoros throughout 2019 and 2020. During this time, most of the migrants were from Central America-particularly the countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. There were a few individuals from Cuba and some indigenous families from southern Mexico as well as other Mexican families escaping violence, though they made up a relatively small part of the population.

When Biden became president in 2021, this initial camp was closed and most of the migrants in Matamoros were allowed to cross into the United States. However, almost immediately, a

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Acknowledgement: This study was supported by Center for Public Choice-College of Charleston.



new camp formed in Reynosa due to the continuation of Title 42 border restrictions put in place at the beginning of the COVID pandemic. These policies continued long after the pandemic had reached its peak in order to prevent people from seeking asylum at the Mexican-American border (Aguilera, 2021), still primarily from Central America. However, at the end of 2021, there began to be a rapid shift with more individuals coming from Haiti.

The story of these individuals coming from Haiti is quite unique. Most of these individuals did not come straight from the island nation, but rather through nations such as Chile and Brazil via the Darien Gap, which is an extremely dangerous place for migrants (Roy & Baumgartner, 2024). In our work in the city of Reynosa, we noticed the change and by 2022, about 80% of migrants were from Haiti. This research is based on ethnographic observations at the border as well as interviews with relief workers, educators, and Haitian migrants. This paper focuses on the differences in the reasons for the Haitian migration, their unique experiences, as well as the often-discriminatory treatment they received. We believe these stories are important not only for the immediate realities at the Mexican-American but also for how they speak to broader issues of immigration globally in a time of great displacement and increasing xenophobia.

Literature Review

In this literature review, we examine scholarship and investigative journalism on Haitians that have migrated to the U.S. border via South America and the treatment that they have faced (Doña-Reveco, 2022; Monslave, 2021; Versiani & Carvalho-Neto, 2021; Yates, 2021). When the first large group of Haitians came to the border in 2021, there was a national hysteria in the U.S. media. Receiving far less attention is the response of Mexican communities to the influx of Haitians into the country. These responses demonstrate the deeper racism and discrimination issues that are still present in parts of Mexican society.

The Journey to the Border Through South America

After the devastating earthquake in 2010, many Haitians began to travel to South America, particularly to nations like Brazil and Chile. In 2020, there were 237,000 Haitians living in Chile and 143,000 living in Brazil. Part of the specific reason for the initial draw to Brazil was due to the construction for the World Cup and Olympic games. However, especially after the election of the more far-right candidate, Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil may have become less desirable (Yates, 2021). Versiani and Carvalho-Neto (2021) argue that Brazilian society was not prepared for these new Haitian migrants and as a result, many of these Haitians self-isolated from the rest of Brazilian society.

Similarly, Chile was seen as a very strong economic destination for many migrants. However, the experience in Chile turned out to be less than ideal for many of the Haitians. Maury-Sintajo et al. (2020) found that four out of five Haitians in Southern Chile faced food shortages. Monslave (2021) argues that increased Haitian immigration also uncovered and revealed much of the underlying racism in Chilean society that had already been present towards indigenous populations. In 2021, Chile passed a more restrictive immigration law that made it easier to expel migrants who entered through irregular means and required them to apply for a visa with the consulate in Haiti (Doña-Reveco, 2022).

Due to the restrictions on travel to Mexico en route to the United States, most Haitians passed through the dangerous Darien Gap between Colombia and Panama. Though Miraglia (2016)



wrote about this dangerous and non-traditional migration route almost a decade ago, the number of migrants increased dramatically after 2020. An analysis of the WOLA data found that though the majority of individuals that have taken this route since January 2022 have been Venezuelans, 17% were of Haitian origin, with Haitians making up nearly half of those travelling the route in early 2023 (Panama-Increase in Migrant Traffic, 2023).

Camps at the Mexican-American Border

Since January 2019, the United States has effectively closed its southern border to asylum seekers, leaving many to face abuses in Mexico. Trump first implemented the Remain in Mexico (Migration Protection Protocol) policy in 2019 after its controversial child separation and family detention policies. McCorkle (2022) highlights some of his work in the camp in Matamoros during this time when immigration came to a virtual standstill. Laughon et al. (2022) describe the female migrants' fear in this camp due to the dangers that they faced accomplishing basic tasks such as using the sanitation services.

Though Biden did end the Migration Protection Protocol, he did not end the Title 42 arrangement which meant that many Haitians were forced to stay for long periods of time at the Mexican-American border as they were not allowed to actually claim asylum. Many individuals that we worked with were able to enter the United States through humanitarian parole, obtained through getting on a list at the local shelter after waiting for months. This system meant many were forced to stay in these border cities like Reynosa for an indefinite amount of time. With the end of Title 42, the process moved to a new application, the CBP 1 app, in which migrants can apply for an appointment with immigration. However, this, too, often takes months, leaving many migrants stranded on the Mexican side of the border. Under the new system, migrants must, at times, wait longer than they did under Title 42.

Though there is limited research on Haitians at the Mexican-American border, Hause (2021) does explain the smaller scale "invisible" Haitian community that was present in the border city of Tijuana. He especially highlights that these migrants were able to find ways to integrate into the current infrastructure that specifically related to their religious practices. Nonetheless, he emphasizes the discrimination they still faced.

Race in Mexico

Though there are Mexicans of African descent, they are mainly located in the Southern areas of the country. In the state of Tamaulipas where Reynosa is located, only 1-2% of the population identifies as being of African descent (Aguilar-Rangel, 2022). Though the levels of inequality between Afro-Mexicanos and other Mexican citizens may not be as great as in nations such as the U.S., there is significant evidence that this inequality exists. For example, an analysis of the data by Aguilar-Rangel (2022) indicates that among the Black population, there is a higher level of individuals who have no education or have incomplete elementary education among Afro-Mexicanos (about 13%) compared to the rest of the Mexican society at 10%.

Muñoz (2009), in his legal history of discrimination in Mexico, describes how the Mexican government has sought to deconstruct racism built into the legal system by recognizing the multicultural nature of the society and working against the homogenous mindset. In 2001, legislation was passed specifically barring discrimination. However, as he highlights, even

though this official discrimination is no longer allowed, it does not mean that the racial attitudes of portions of the Mexican population or culture have automatically changed. Figueroa and Tanaka (2015) examine how the idea of the country being “mestizo” has been used to try to create a post-racial society, but this perspective overlooks many of the racist dynamics still at play in the society, especially when being mestizo carries a certain level of privilege.

Theoretical Framework

Our work is grounded in critical border and migration studies (Bregman, 2016; Carens, 1987; McCorkle, 2020; Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2009). From this perspective, we raise questions about what it means to enforce nation-state borders in the face of these lived complexities. This complexity relates to the critical feminist border perspectives (Anzaldúa, 1987) which explore the lived experience of self, identity, and being in the dualistic either-or/both-and realities simultaneously defining life in liminal spaces.

Anderson, Sharma, and Wright (2009) highlight how borders create “a particular kind of relationship, one based on deep divisions and inequalities between people who are given varying national statuses” (p. 6). This inequality is perhaps most vividly described in Carens’ (1987) seminal work in which he compares restrictive immigration to the feudal system that forced individuals to remain on the land where they were born despite their dismal life prospects. He argues that just as we find the feudal system indefensible today, wealthier nations have a moral obligation to end restrictive immigration systems. Authors like Bregman (2016) and Basik (2013) question why national origin is still the one area where discrimination is unabashedly accepted even though it is where the variance in inequality is the most profound. Fortier (2006) and Miller (2019) highlight the modern disconnect on borders and migration. In many aspects, borders have never been more open for those who have wealth or for multinational corporations. In fact, traveling across borders or “hyper-mobility” is seen as a form of progress for those with resources (Fortier, 2006, p. 318). However, for those from middle to working class backgrounds, the border has never been more closed or militarized. In some ways, these restrictions go beyond simple nationalism as it is the elite controlling the movement of the poor and marginalized (Miller, 2019).

Race and immigration are also central to this study, and the earliest immigration restrictions in the U.S. were based on race and ethnicity, particularly the Chinese Exclusion Act. During the 1920s, the quota system brazenly created immigration restrictions based on the issue of race (Ngai, 1999). With the passage of Johnson’s immigration act in the 1960s, some of the more egregiously racist aspects of immigration ended though race still continued to play a central role in immigration discussions and policies.

Employing a critical discourse analysis lens (e.g., Ali, 2011; Alim, 2010; Clark et al., 1991; Huot et al., 2016; Krosavik, 2010; Shapiro & Watson, 2022; Van Leeuwen, 2009), we interrogate the discourses and structures of racism and colonialism at the Mexico-U.S. border. Critical language studies investigate the ways that power relations and ideological processes infiltrate language conventions and practices (Alim, 2010). From this perspective, discourses are simultaneously the linguistic practices that articulate ideologies but they are also the epistemological structure of the social context that shapes the internal realities of those speaking.



Critical discourse analysis has been previously utilized to examine how popular media frames immigration in the U.S. and elsewhere (Huot et al., 2016; Krosavik, 2010). From van Dijk's research in the Netherlands in the 1980s to Wodak's research in Austria in the 1990s, there is a strong tradition of using critical discourse analysis as a conceptual tool to unravel the dynamics of power and language in both social and individual discourses around immigration (Krosavik, 2010).

Methods

As a critical ethnography (Madison, 2011), this study is informed by perspectives that highlight the positionalities of ethnographic scholars engaged in political activism (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; García et al., 2021). All three researchers have experience with immigrant populations in K-12 teaching contexts, advocacy organizations, and humanitarian work at immigrant detention centers. All three speak Spanish with varying degrees of fluency. Even so, the refugee camps in Mexico are spaces in which the researchers are conspicuous and easily identified as White Americans. Access to refugees and immigrants for interviews was brokered by Mexican-born colleagues who have established relationships with many of the people living in the camps as well as people facilitating relief efforts and immigration support. After an explanation of the purpose of the interviews and an introduction by these colleagues, researchers were able to conduct interviews with a level of trust.

Data sources include discussions of our activist work in the refugee camps; translated transcripts of audio-recordings of semi-structured interviews with asylum seekers, educators and volunteers; news reports; observations; and field notes. Interviews included descriptive questions to better understand the individual's home life and decision to undertake the arduous journey to seek asylum; experience questions about their travels and their time in the refugee camp; and knowledge questions about navigating the immigration process (Madison, 2011).

These data sources were analyzed to determine discourse patterns, socio-political contexts, and power dynamics that shaped the stories of Haitian immigrants in Mexico. We then analyzed the discourses of asylum seekers, noting differences between groups of immigrants. We triangulated these articulations against the observations of educators and volunteers to examine the ways the broader discourses on their experiences, especially related to race, shaped their experiences.

Research Questions

What have been the experiences of Haitian migrants in their journey and stay at the Mexican-American border?

What has been the response of the Mexican government and public to the surge of Haitian migrants and what role has race played into this response?

Findings

Route to the Mexican-American Border

Reasons for Journey. Though we did not discuss the situation of why the migrants left Haiti in-depth, the topic did arise. One man described how he was deported from the U.S., and when he went back to Haiti and tried to get his passport renewed, they killed his driver. As

he described it, “Todo es sangre, me da un baño (everything is blood, I was bathed in it.” Another Haitian lady stated that “uno no puede vivir tranquila, por eso nosotros llega hasta ahí (you can’t live peacefully, that is why we came here).” She explained that they would not have wanted to leave their country and be forced to live in the conditions they were in at the border if there had been better options. One individual stated that, “Porque si no tengo bandida, si no tengo violencia, nadie los va a dejar Haití, nadie los va a dejar por mexicanos para llegar hasta aquí pasando trabajo, unos un mes en el camino, caminando, caminando mucho, hay mucha gente que esta muerte también camina (Because if we didn’t have gangs, if we didn’t have violence, nobody is going to leave Haiti, nobody is going to go through Mexico to get here, having to work hard, about a month on the road... walking, walking a lot, there are many people who are dead but we still walk).” As was mentioned in the literature review, we found that most Haitians did not come straight from Haiti but had journeyed from Chile or Brazil. One Haitian woman stated that the reason they left Chile was because of job insecurity. As she stated, it was “algún día sí, algún día no” (some days yes, some days no). Another lady who had lived in Brazil said that she did have work in Brazil, but she did not have a profession with the opportunity for advancement. One of the Haitian men commented that the money in Brazil “no vale nada” (was not worth anything). One migrant, speaking Spanish and Haitian Creole, described the reason for coming to the border, “Cuando yo nacida, mi familia esta pobre no puede ayudarme a continuar, pero yo trabajando mucho para ayudar. Mi fille mío, mi niño mío, un día, sigue siendo eso en su país. Puede trabajar también para ayuda también (When I was born, my family was poor and could not help me to continue, but I worked hard to help. My daughter, my child, one day, will be staying in your country. She can also work to help too).

Dangerous Journey to and Through Mexico. A continual theme that came out in the interviews was the dangerous journey that the Haitian migrants faced both coming to and passing through Mexico. Participants specifically described the dangerous journey they faced going through the Darien Gap between Colombia and Panama where they saw dead bodies and experienced great danger themselves. As one man stated quite bluntly that they had to “caminar sobre los muertos” (walk on top of the dead). They would see a head or arm on the ground, and the animals would eat the remains.

One aid worker described how there is a misconception that these migrants can just easily move through Mexico and how this was a myth. She often described how Mexican immigration can be particularly cruel, even harsher than American immigration. She specifically mentioned “the violations and the beatings and the harassment and the persecution against Haitians at the Guatemala border in Tapachula.” This type of mistreatment was confirmed by a local journalist who showed the first author pictures of Haitians being beaten and mistreated by Mexican authorities.

Life at the Border

Hard Life in the Camp. Though there were certain basic needs met in the camp, there were still a lot of issues that the Haitian population (and the broader migrant population) faced. One individual talked about how they could not sleep well in the camp, “but I cannot go back. I have to go ahead because there is an opportunity to make money there [in the U.S.]”

There was also just the issue of the daily insecurity of living at the border. As one migrant stated, “Aquí está muy difícil, de todo El Mundo vive aquí... está peligrosamente esa calle de



la noche a las 8 no puede salir afuera tiene, tiene mucha gente al mar, puede salir gente armada” (It is very difficult here, everyone lives here; it is dangerous this street at night, at 8:00 you cannot go outside, there are many people near the water, armed people can be out there). Another woman stated, “pero hay mucha amenaza, me hace sobre es” (but there is a great threat, they made it to me).

Work Permits. Another finding that came out of the interview with one of the aid workers at the border was the need for Haitians to get a work permit in Mexico. Otherwise, they were in greater danger of mistreatment by the Mexican military and police. She mentioned that the Mexican officials could be especially cruel to Haitian immigrants. As she stated, “They will work to get their documentation. For protection because they're black and prejudice and racism against them is very harsh.” This dynamic was confirmed by another aid worker that we worked with at the border who was from Monterrey and talked about the large number of migrants that had stayed in the city.

Language. The ability to speak Spanish was obviously more of an issue for the Haitians than many of the other immigrant groups. Often, it was the men who spoke more Spanish. The most likely reason for this was that the men had been engaged in the workforce in countries like Chile and often arrived there sooner than their wives. Similarly, the children also spoke more fluent Spanish due to the fact that they had been raised in South America. The children were often better able to read our flyers in Haitian Creole, because they had more formal education than their parents. As a result, it was the children who frequently served as our translators, especially when we conducted clinics to provide eyeglasses for migrants in the camp.

Gender Demographics. Another dynamic we found at the border was that there was a greater number of single males than there were among previous waves of immigrants from Central America, which were often primarily either made up of single mothers and their children or mother-father family units. The reasons for this are not completely clear, but it did appear that part of this may have been due to the greater tendency of economic migration. As an aid worker noted, the higher percentage of single men may have also contributed to the uneasy feelings of some of the populace intertwined with existing racial fears and antagonism.

Lack of Unauthorized Crossings. One thing that became very clear in our conversations with the aid workers, migrants, and our own field experiences was the lack of Haitians that sought to cross the river illegally. One of the aid workers said that the reason for this might have been because many of the Haitians had been deported after the large-scale migration in Del Rio in 2021. There was a fear that if they crossed the river, they would not just be deported back to Mexico but even to Haiti where they had not been for many years. This dynamic was confirmed when we traveled one night in December of 2022 on the U.S. side of the border where Border Patrol officials were apprehending migrants. There were migrants from Nicaragua, Cuba, and Honduras, but there were no migrants from Haiti. We talked to one man who had originally crossed illegally earlier, had been deported to Haiti, and then had made the whole trip through the Darien Gap again. This time, he said he would be waiting for his appointment to enter, although it remained a struggle for him to obtain an appointment for his entire family.

The CBP 1 App. In our trip in May 2023, one of the central themes that we discussed with the migrants was the CBP 1 App, which had been used before Title 42 but had become

essentially the sole way to enter the U.S. legally. Some migrants, both Venezuelans in Matamoros and Haitians in Reynosa, described the chance to obtain an appointment as a “lottery” based just on luck and chance. There was a discussion about how some of the people who had just come to the border got an appointment while others who had been waiting for weeks, if not months, were still not able to get an appointment.

Race and the Experience of Haitian Migrants

Sense of Racism. There were mixed responses when we asked Haitians about discrimination they faced in Mexico. Some downplayed or even denied that they had been treated poorly or discriminated against in Mexico. However, one man talked about the dangers they faced when going out into the city. Though he did not directly mention this was because of his racial background, this may have been part of the issue. Interviews with some of the volunteers revealed some of the discrimination was likely due to racial discrimination, including Haitians being denied bus tickets and even being blocked from medical care.

One of the aid workers was more blunt in her assessment of the racial elements involved. As she stated, the groups that have faced the most rejection are “indigenous women and Black Haitians, but especially the Black Haitians... and the way Mexican society speaks about them.” A pastor also highlighted the role of race overall in Mexican society. He argued that Mexican society was not often overtly racist; instead, it was often demonstrated in less care or concern for those from certain racial backgrounds, especially for Black/Brown migrants compared to White migrants.

One aid worker, who had been working in Matamoros for over 20 years, mentioned how many issues of racism impacted the treatment of Haitians. In particular, he mentioned a couple videos that went viral, including one with people complaining about the food. He said this really changed the attitudes of Mexicans towards some migrants because of a perceived insult to Mexican culture. He also said a “scarcity mindset” contributed to Mexican communities’ resistance to supporting immigrants.

Interestingly, we found one aspect in which race or perceived culture almost served as a protection for Haitian migrants. As one aid worker stated, “The cartel won't touch them because the voodoo worshippers among them, they're afraid of confrontation of darkness. So that's the urban legend that we hear over and over when we serve there.” Though it is hard to actually confirm this, unlike other migrants that we have worked with in Central America, we have not met migrants from Haiti that have been kidnapped by the cartel. On the other hand, there were reports or rumors of organ harvesting, but it was hard for us to confirm this detail.

Contrast with Experiences of Russians. Another clear dynamic seen in the interviews with volunteers and aid workers was the difference in treatment between Haitian and Russian migrants, who increasingly came to Reynosa in 2022 after Russia launched the war with Ukraine. As one volunteer stated, “I hate to say it’s just black and white... [but] mostly Haitians were standing in the streets.” There was also the perception that Russian migrants were more likely to get preferential treatment by U.S. officials. As another volunteer stated, “So we have our White Russian refugees, or I guess, asylum seekers that seem to be getting across the border... a little bit quicker than some of the Haitians.” Another volunteer described how having Russian asylum seekers on the other side of the border opened many more doors for



their non-profit and that they were received with greater acceptance than other asylum seekers that had crossed.

Most Russians were also able to enter directly into Mexico with few problems. One Russian woman joked that the Mexican and Russian government were friends. One of the Russian families we worked with also talked about the relative ease that they had entering Mexico; however, they also mentioned that they purposely chose to come from Dubai as there would be less suspicion than from other nations. On the other hand, one Russian family said that they had been deported when they arrived at the airport and sent back to Turkey.

Media Treatment of Haitians. We specifically analyzed some of the treatment of Haitians in the local paper in Reynosa, *El Mañana de Reynosa*. Though the paper did not use an overly xenophobic or racist tone, it did make light of the Haitian population in problematic ways. One example was telling the “humorous” story of a Mexican woman who was cheating on her husband with a Haitian migrant on her 10th anniversary (Elotero Sorende, 2022). They also reported on stories of Haitians paying money to Mexicans to get married in order to obtain legal status in Mexico and facilitate their way to the United States (Piña, 2021). It should be noted that the paper seemed to have an element of concern for the plight of the Haitian population. In another article, they describe that “migrantes viven en las calles en condiciones de precariedad que atentan contra la dignidad humana (migrants lived in the streets in precarious conditions that do not provide human dignity)” (En Reynosa Hay Crisis, 2022).

Our interview with one of the pastors who works in the area revealed that more of the anti-immigrant narratives were especially coming from social media. In Reynosa, another aid worker said a story went viral when a Haitian migrant supposedly knocked down an older lady. An aid worker also reported that social media were frequently monitored and manipulated by cartels who would lure unsuspecting migrants into gathering places where they could be forced to hire the services of coyotes, highlighting the need for critical online literacy skills and the significance of social networks of trust.

Segregation of Migrants. The realities of segregation in the camps were apparent. In one of the camps in Reynosa, the only non-Haitian migrants (from El Salvador and Honduras) we met were in a clearly distinct spot from the rest of the Haitian population. One of the Salvadorian ladies had disparaged the actions of some of the Haitian migrants and talked about them as if they were a very distinct and inferior culture.

Another one of the workers talked about a fight between a Haitian migrant and one of the Venezuelan migrants in the camp. This, in turn, almost became a larger conflict between the smaller Venezuelan population (of about 10) and other members of the Haitian community (several thousand). He commented that the Venezuelan community left the camp because of this conflict. This reality of racial tension and segregation has been seen throughout our time in the camp, including earlier when indigenous Guatemalan women described how they were treated particularly harshly by other asylum seekers.

Discussion

The Experience of Haitian Migrants

We have found that the experience of Haitian migrants along the Mexican-American border is both similar to and different from the experiences of other migrant communities. The racial

differences and language barriers certainly cause a greater level of separation from the Mexican-American community than previous waves of migrants from Central and South America. However, the similar experiences with Remain in Mexico and Title 42 means that migrants overall are forced to stay in extremely dangerous and unsanitary conditions. We regularly saw similar living conditions among Venezuelans in Matamoros and Haitians in Reynosa.

One difference in their experience was the greater reticence of crossing the border illegally, even before Title 42 ended. This hesitation was certainly not the case with previous waves of Venezuelans, Haitians, or Cubans. Part of the reluctance might have been due to the horrific experiences that Haitians had in Del Rio. According to an analysis by Witness at the Border in February 2022, the Biden Administration had already deported over 20,000 Haitians back to Haiti (Isacson, 2022). Another reason may have been less access to resources than other migrant communities. We also found that the language gap and greater number of single males set the Haitian asylum community apart from other immigrant groups.

Another theme was the “newness” of having Haitian migrants in the border towns. Participants talked about the various waves of immigration over the last three decades in ways that align with demographic and historical accounts. Others talked about how many more people are on the streets as the shelters have grown full, suggesting that the newer waves of Haitian immigrants are exceeding current capacity of shelters and services, as noted by the Haitian-American news (Haitians in US-Mexico Border, 2022).

Discrepancy of Immigration Policies

This study highlights the inconsistency in immigration policy as a whole. Whatever role race played in the treatment of Haitians by the Mexican population, it is clear that due to their national status, Haitians suffered higher levels of risk, pain, and death as almost all had to pass through the Darien Gap since they were unable to obtain visas to fly directly into Mexico. This obstacle is not the case for many individuals from places like Russia or even those migrants who come from countries like Colombia, Peru, or Costa Rica. Though greater restrictions on some of these visas may be due to the Mexican government directly, it is also likely that some of this is due to pressure from the United States government, which Miller (2019) describes as exporting their borders around the world.

We saw this dynamic with Russian migrants, who were able to fly to cities like Cancun or Mexico City and did not have to travel through the Darien Gap, or Colombian asylum seekers who were able to fly close to the border and almost immediately cross. The only Haitian migrants that we met that were able to directly fly to Mexico were those who had already previously obtained a work permit.

Race and Haitian Immigration

We also found racial realities and discrimination with Haitian migrants. Educators mentioned disparities in access to goods and services, including medical needs, and one of the pastors indicated how that had changed in the Reynosa area over time. Initially tolerant, the townspeople grew increasingly concerned about the numbers and racial diversification of the newer waves of immigrants, making it difficult for aid workers to raise financial support for the camps.



Another result was the different perceptions of treatment, particularly around racial realities. For example, participants highlighted how the “novelty” of having Russian immigrants might have led to their better treatment compared to the Haitian immigrants. The newspapers also tended to repeat stereotypes about Haitian men, and social media attacks on Haitians were much more direct and intense.

Our data also pointed to worse treatment of Haitians by Mexican officials and greater propensity to use force than with other groups of migrants. This harsh reality for Haitian immigrants was confirmed by Brody (2021) in an interview with an aid worker. She stated:

Haitian asylum seekers have it worse than anyone. They can't hide in Mexico; their skin tone sets them apart from the Central American asylum seekers. And racism in Mexico is very strong. People won't serve them food or sell them water – I've seen it myself.

These findings demonstrate how Haitians can be stereotyped or condemned according to the worst actions of the community. Though we did not hear many reports about violence from Haitian immigrants, they tended to be judged by the bad actions of the few, whether that was a Haitian man supposedly pushing down an elderly woman or the news story of a Haitian man sleeping with a local woman on her anniversary. Of course, this tendency to highlight the “worst” actions of a group of people is not new and is something that has been present with immigrant communities for decades.

Our field observations also showed the nuance in how Haitians may have been more protected from cartel kidnappings due to some of the superstitions of the cartels surrounding voodoo. It should be noted that there could have also been an economic aspect at play. Of course, issues of race intersect with issues of class, and there might have been a greater belief among the cartels that migrants from places like Cuba had wealthier families in the United States (McDonnell, 2019).

Conclusion

The Haitian population at the border reveals the complexity of immigration and asylum. On the one hand, they are asylum seekers escaping the violence and insecurity in Haiti. On the other hand, they are also, in a sense, economic migrants leaving perhaps less violent but still difficult conditions in countries like Chile or Brazil.

Though Biden kept Title 42 restrictions in place, there were more opportunities for Haitian migrants in places like Reynosa to eventually enter the U.S. under humanitarian parole than there were under the Trump Administration. Relaxing some of the restrictions is the reason that most of the migrants we have worked with in Reynosa have actually been able to enter the United States, even if they have to wait a few months at the border. We fear that with the end of Title 42, the reenactment of Title 8, and the upcoming presidential elections, policies may become more hostile with immigration enforcement at the border as Americans, in general, are becoming less open to immigration (Samuels, 2023).

We contend that a consistent, more open asylum policy would reduce the chaos and mistreatment of migrants at the border. There would still be “surges” due to conditions in sending nations; however, this could be less pronounced if asylum policy did not shift so dramatically from one administration to another. Given the fact that many of these migrants

are also being drawn to the U.S. for economic reasons, it is imperative that the U.S. government offer more pathways for work visas for those seeking employment to reduce the burden on the asylum and refugee system. The current numbers of employment-based visas offered every year is notably low at only 140,000 a year with 28.6% reserved for “skilled workers, professionals, or unskilled workers” and the others reserved for those in specific professions, those with advanced degrees, and wealthy immigrant investors (U.S. State Department, 2023). The situation with Haitian migrants at the border exemplifies the need for a reimagination of our immigration policies as critical border and migration scholars (Basik, 2013; Carens, 1987; McCorkle, 2019) have called for. The current system is not sustainable and is deeply troubling for the human rights of immigrant populations. Drawing from immigration research of policies from around the globe, we offer some suggestions for policy solutions that might prove effective for Haitians, and others, at the Mexico-U.S. border. With a careful discussion of the methodological challenges involved in measuring and analyzing immigration policy across international contexts and over time, Gest and colleagues (2014) highlight why solutions are often context-specific, and we offer these as research-based suggestions that serve as starting points for more equitable policies than the current “detain and punish” approach (Lindscoog, 2019).

1. Before Haitian asylum seekers reach the US border. Young (2018) recommends resettlement processing as an alternative to asylum seeking because it is more orderly and saves Haitians from the dangers of long journeys by boat and foot. However, lessons learned from such efforts in the 1990s, when the resettlement office was located in Haiti directly across the street from the national police headquarters, Young recommends the use of regional resettlement offices, community outreach efforts, and streamlined paperwork processes for applications and out processing of security clearances.

2. Once Haitian asylum seekers are at the U.S. border. Examining the ways that policies that arose following the Vietnam war in the 1970s continue to shape immigration policies for asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Haiti, Davis (2023) offers several suggestions to remedy the inequities that occur once asylum seekers reach the U.S. border. He suggests that U.S. involvement in the Haitian crisis means that there is a moral obligation for the U.S. to implement humane policy for the flood of refugees that has followed. First, he suggests that funding for Haitians be more equitably comparable to funding for Afghani refugees, noting “the FY Continuing Resolution provided \$6.3 billion for parolees from Afghanistan...but what assistance is being given to refugees coming from Haiti” (p. 311). Second, he suggests that the quota increases offered to refugees from Afghanistan be offered to Haitian refugees. Ultimately, he argues that the overt “racism and violence on display” towards Haitians be abolished, through both policy shifts at the macro level and racial bias training at the micro level.

3. For the Haitian diaspora already in the U.S. In a review that traces migration from Haiti beginning in 1957 during the Duvalier era, Rosier (2018), highlights the many ways that the Haitian diaspora who have already left the country have contributed to “Brain Drain” in Haiti. Consequently, Rosier offers several suggestions for supporting the Haitian diaspora in contributing to improvements in the homeland, which could help stem the outflow of Haitians in the long run. The suggestions include: allowing Haitians with foreign national citizenship, not just dual citizens, to vote in Haitian elections; allowing resettled Haitians to invest in Haitian projects and to lend their expertise on projects of limited duration;



establishing the infrastructure needed for e-learning programs to support the crumbling educational system; and support the establishment of bonds and other structures that support private investment. Wah (2013) points to the United Nation's TOKTEN program (Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals), among the oldest of the diaspora engagement programs, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) as examples of diasporic initiatives that could be supported and expanded to support the Haitian diaspora in contributing to the well-being and rebuilding of Haiti.

To fully implement an equitable, humane, and sustainable immigration process in the U.S., we must move toward a more holistic approach. Relying on immigration patrol officers along the border and Mexican officials monitoring camps has led to violence and exploitation of extremely vulnerable populations, all while giving cartels a financial incentive to remain involved in human trafficking across the border. Instead, we should be relying on local resettlement programs that can assist with the immigration process before people even begin their journey, removing the obstacles that result from racial bias. A clear understanding of a streamlined process could prevent much of the human suffering we have witnessed at the border with people waiting in tents for months to make a simple application appointment.

We must also provide opportunities for Haitians to remain connected to their home country. By leveraging the Haitian communities that are already well-established in the U.S., we could build an organized and efficient welcome program for new arrivals. A smooth transition to a community that includes people who speak the same language and share the same cultural heritage would dramatically reduce the amount of time that people struggle to gain stability. By safeguarding the dignity of immigrant populations and valuing their contributions to society, we create an environment in which people can thrive. Welcoming the ideas, knowledge, and expertise of these communities can be beneficial for those that choose to remain in the U.S., those that return to Haiti, and those that identify both as their home.

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