Executive Summary

For the past week, 31 year-old Miguel has brought his wife and 3-year-old daughter to the Garita El Chaparral, one of three border crossings from Tijuana into California. The trio watches a group of about 100 people gather around a man with a large notebook, with more than 1,000 names written in it. It's only 9 am but intense heat is starting to make the crowd sweat as they listen intently while the man with the book calls out names. Everyone here, a group that includes people from other parts of Mexico, Central America, Asia, Africa, even Syria, is planning to ask for asylum in the United States. Credible fear claims, the basis for asylum in the US, grew by almost 2,000 percent between 2008 and 2016.

Miguel says he's trying to save his family from the narco violence that has engulfed his Southern Mexican state of Guerrero. But asking for asylum has gotten harder in the past months as the US Government has tried to narrow the criteria for who they say qualify for asylum hearings. The US Attorney General Jeff Sessions recently stated that fleeing domestic abuse and gang violence aren't valid reasons, and instructed border officials to turn people specifying those reasons away.

There's a lot of information that Miguel and his family might benefit from as they wait to hear their names called. For example, that it's even more difficult for Mexican nationals to gain asylum for cases of gang violence; that the family will likely get separated in some fashion; that the book of names everybody is glued to is actually not an official ledger; and that there are a host of social services and resources for migrants in Tijuana to help families. Paulina Olvera runs a Tijuana based non-profit that provides resources for migrants and deportees. "As the border keeps getting harder to cross, or as policies get harder, that means more people stay in Tijuana, and that Tijuana is becoming a destination," she said.

The reality for Miguel, and the tens of thousands of migrants hoping to reach the US is that it's getting harder and harder, formally by asking for asylum, or informally by crossing illegally. That means that there's an increasing need for migrants to know the ever-changing immigration policies on the US side, and the basics of seeking assistance on the Mexican side while they sort their futures out. That being said, one shelter manager, Chema García, said information

might keep migrants safe, but it won't change their mind. "Whatever changes they make to immigration policy on the US side, people are still going to come," García said.

Background

Internews US programs coordinator Jesse Hardman recently spent a few days assessing specific information needs within the migrant community in Tijuana. He spoke with civil society actors, migrants, and immigration advocates about what questions people have regarding border policy, and potential ways to create information access related to this shifting situation.

While fewer migrants are gaining entry into the US, ICE arrests in the US rose in 2017, and the number of migrants detained at the border has doubled since this time last year, with nearly 50,000 migrants being apprehended in the first half of 2018. The cumulative impact of these evolving immigration policies is that the United States' Southern border is a chaotic scene. US immigration policies are not significantly slowing the flood of migration from Mexico and Central America, meaning border areas are growing in ways they're not prepared for.

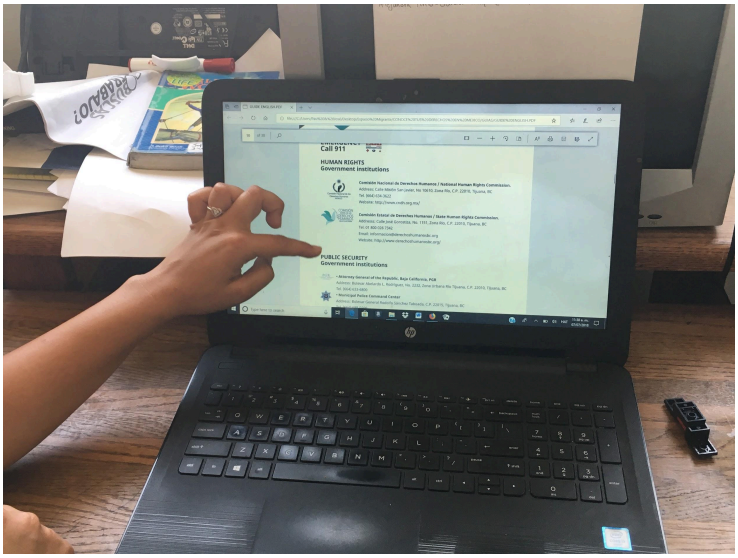
A small coalition of Tijuana based shelters, nonprofits, and advocacy groups are assisting migrants from around the world and Mexican deportees with legal help, education, job assistance, applications for visas and state IDs, and simple resources like beds and food. This is a loose coalition with limited resources but a huge task. While the US pushes to close its borders, more and more migrants are left to navigate a scenario they hadn't prepared for an extended stay in Mexico.

Many are still determined to find a way into the US, but increasingly are aware that goal may mean getting returned to their countries of origin - places that are mired in violence and poverty.

Highlights of border research

There are a number of established local partners to work with in Tijuana and along the border including:

- Espacio Migrante: A Tijuana based non-profit that assists migrants in finding necessary resources in Mexico, including housing, jobs, education, and legal assistance including humanitarian visas.



- Casa del Migrante/Madre Assunta: These Tijuana based shelters assist migrants and deportees, providing them with housing, job leads, psychosocial assistance, legal aid, and give them up to a month to determine whether they plan to continue on to the US or try and settle in Mexico.

- Al Otro Lado: a group of immigration lawyers trying to help educate migrants on their asylum rights, and assist people who have been separated from family members by immigration officials in the US.

- Enclave Caracol: A cafe and social service organization based in central Tijuana. They serve a free dinner for migrants every Monday-Thursday night and offer legal advice, free phone calls home for migrants, and other resources.

There are a number of migrant resources published by international humanitarian organizations including ICRC and IOM, but distribution and outreach of those materials seemed less clear,and Internews' didn't didn't speak to any migrants who had accessed these materials. Tijuana based Espacio Migrante has created its own local resource guide for migrants, which has been handed out on an ongoing basis and includes a list of shelters and service providers.

Espacio Migrante hosts weekly meetings with a group of local migrants to source issues they are dealing with and questions they have. They have developed a WhatsApp group to be in touch with other service providers and some migrants, but would like to develop a texting system to grow the number of migrants who can benefit from being in touch with them.

The main categories of information that appear to be most needed and desired by migrants and deportees relate to:

- Updated policy information and official criteria for seeking asylum in the US
- Process of locating separated family members in the US, including how to locate children and gain custody of them

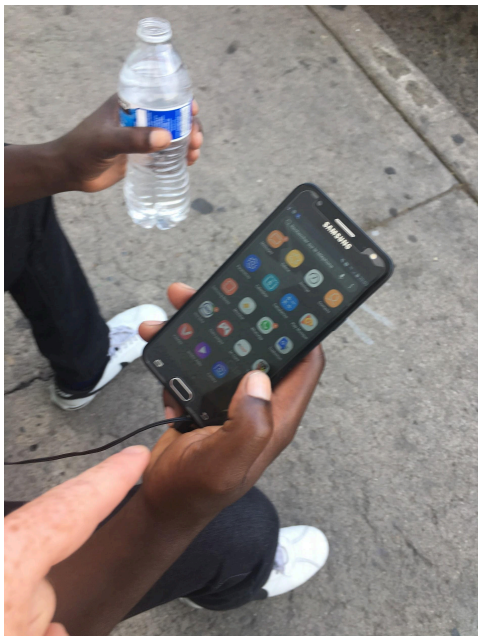
- How to apply for a humanitarian visa in Mexico which qualifies migrants for jobs and health services
- General access to social services in Tijuana and along the border
- Opportunities to make an income and send money home while migrants determine whether or not they are going to try to cross the border

Information Landscape

Word of Mouth

Information among migrants on the Mexico/US border flows predominantly through word of mouth. Migrants considering seeking asylum said their awareness of shifts in immigration policy on the US side of the border is based on phone calls with family members living in the US, and on speaking with other migrants at shelters and border checkpoints. One Mexican family planning to ask for asylum said they were aware that the family separation policy had been changed again by the Trump administration. They got that information by calling a sister living in Los Angeles.

When they get to Tijuana, many migrants head to the Chaparral border checkpoint, one of three in town, to put their name in an unofficial ledger of people planning to ask for asylum. They then ask other migrants who have been on the border for longer where they can find things like shelter, food, health care, and legal aid, and are directed to some of the different social services in town.



Cell phones/Internet

All of the migrants we spoke to had smart phones. Many of them had phones stolen during their travels from Central America to Mexico's Northern border. They said they were able to acquire new phones in Mexico for as little as fifty US dollars, and were able to get unlimited data and texting plans in Mexico for around five dollars. The majority of migrants were connecting with family members and friends via WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. One Tijuana based social service center, Enclave Caracol, has a fixed telephone line that migrants can come and use to call home and let family members know they are safe. This cafe also offers free internet to migrants looking to research their situation, and communicate with family members.

In the past few years, many Central American migrants have started to travel as part of formal asylum seeking caravans which are organized by migrant advocacy groups. Hundreds of migrants have made the trek across Mexico and gotten legal coaching along the way so they

are prepared to present their reasons for asking for asylum in the US. People who travel in these groups tend to stay connected to pertinent migration information via the organizers of these caravans through Facebook and email newsletters.

Migrant Shelters

The information most crucial to migrants is in the hands of local shelters, non-profits, and other migrants on the Mexican side of the border, and mainly with legal advocates and family members on the US side of the border. There are approximately 16 shelters around Tijuana, although only a handful are professionally run. Many of these spaces provide legal counsel to migrants, which helps them get up to speed on the ramifications of their situation, both in terms of what they need to do in order to have legal status in Mexico, and what their legal options are for seeking asylum in the United States. Shelters we spoke with said they do not advise migrants on crossing the border illegally, but they do make sure they are aware of the consequences of getting caught. Shelters also offer psychosocial assistance to migrants, acknowledging that many are fleeing violent realities in their home areas, and have also experienced difficulties during their journey North.

Ivette Carrasco helps manage Casa del Migrante, a Catholic Church-run shelter that hosts up to around 150 men at a time, most of them Central Americans in their 20s. Carrasco said she conducts intake meetings when new migrants arrive. "We ask them about their lives, what they do for a living, whether they've been deported before, why they're leaving their places of origin," she said. They use those meetings to let them know that they have a few days to decide if they plan to cross the border illegally, apply for asylum, or if they plan to stay and try to find work in Tijuana. Casa del Migrante also has a lawyer who meets with migrants to inform them on what legal issues they face both by staying in Mexico and attempting to seek asylum or cross illegally into the United States. "We're constantly checking in with them to make sure they are working on some sort of plan," said Carrasco. She says they have a few weeks to decide whether or not they plan to try and go to the US, or find a job and try and settle in Tijuana.

Every weekday evening local immigration attorney Daniel Bribiescas visits nearby Madre Assunta, another Catholic Church-run shelter which only takes in women and children, who range in age from five months up to 13 years-old. He meets with around 20 women a night to go over their cases. "The talk that I give many of them is, what are the five ways somebody can

qualify for asylum?" said Bribiescas. He also winds up consulting women who've been deported, sometimes without their children.

Migration Focused Meetings and Materials

The Tijuana based non-profit Espacio Migrante established a weekly meeting around migration issues, with migrants, that originally focused on the thousands of Haitians that came through Tijuana starting in 2015, and has now carried over to focus more on Central American migrants. "We talk about problems they have," said Paulina Olvera, the head of Espacio Migrante. "Some migrants got scammed by an employer. We're going to help them file a complaint. Not everyone has access to health care, we help them with that," she said. Olvera also conducts Know Your Rights workshops at different shelters so migrants know their legal options in Mexico. And she developed a Tijuana focused pamphlet that covers a variety of migration information, including shelter addresses, how to apply for a humanitarian visa in Mexico, and an explanation of migrants rights according to the Mexican Constitution.

Chema García, who runs the Juventud 2000 shelter, said he's part of a countrywide network of migrant service providers, none of which get money from the Mexican government. "We have regular phone meetings to discuss what's happening with Central Americans," said García.

Information needs and gaps

Questions

Tijuana based immigration lawyer Daniel Bribriescas said migrating women arrive at the shelter where he works with a variety of questions. "They want to know if their kids are going to get separated, if they're going to be detained. What happens in the immigration courts. If they'll need bail money," he said. Bribriescas said both migrants and deportees often have questions about applying for new identification documents that often get lost in transit.

Espacio Migrante's Paulina Olvera said some of the Mexican nationals deported to Tijuana have been in the US for decades, and aren't used to life back in their country of origin. Their questions often pertain to the basics of getting started back in Mexico. "They were making 20 dollars an hour in the US, and when they heard what they were going to be making here in Mexico they were in shock," she said.

Misinformation

The most common misinformation that migrants have regarding the border, according to Espacio Migrante's Paulina Olvera, relates to asylum. "Some of them have the idea that it's super easy to get asylum, or they just say, I'm going to turn myself in," she said. Olvera encourages them to talk to an immigration lawyer first, but she said many get restless waiting in Tijuana and decide to cross without knowing enough about what to expect at the border.

Olvera said some Central American migrants get humanitarian visas in Mexico, but still decide to try for asylum in the US. She said sometimes before they go to the border they destroy their

Mexican documents. "Because they think if they already have asylum here, they can't get it in the United States," she said. Her organization now offers to hold on to those documents if people are planning to try and go into the US.

Ivette Carrasco of Casa del Migrante says many migrants also think that life will instantly be better once they cross. "People think there will be dollars falling from the sky," she said. Her organization offers to serve as an informal bank for migrants who need somewhere safe for the money they arrive to Tijuana with, or make in Mexico, so it doesn't get taken from them when they cross the border.

Lawyer David Briebriescas said if more effort was made to educate people in their home regions about the difficulties of seeking asylum or crossing into the US, he thinks the situation at the border would be different. "Lots of people wouldn't come, or at least wouldn't be trying to get into the US," he said. Briebriescas said he heard a radio program in the Mexican state of Michoacan, an area inundated with narcotrafficking, that encouraged people facing violence to flee to the US. "In reality, I want people to know if they migrate they'll suffer, being detained isn't a good experience," he said.

Tijuana based media

Shelter operator Chema García says the 100 or so migrants who sleep at his facility, Juventud 2000, watch local news on the shelter's TV. "They watch the local channels that all cover what's happening over in the US with immigration," he said. Espacio Migrante's Paulina Olvera said over the past few years she's successfully lobbied local media to cover the situation with migrants and deportees in Tijuana. She said this reporting helps to humanize and familiarize local residents with the struggles and experiences migrants and deportees are going through.

Trust

Primary trust for migrants and deportees lays with family and friends in the US. Secondarily, migrant service organizations along the border are starting to make some inroads. "Lots of people get here and they have a hard time believing in everything they're hearing about their situations. But if it's a trusted source, like shelter Casa del Migrante, people who dedicate their services to migrants, that'll

work," said Daniel Briebriescas. He's trying to tap into that growing trust by creating a series of instructional videos about migrant rights, asylum claims, and other immigration issues. The goal is to get all the trusted service organizations in Tijuana to post them online, and organize live viewings during meals at shelters and other meetings where they're likely to reach a large number of people.

Espacio Migrante has begun developing longer term programs that are meant to establish trust with migrants and deportees through convincing them to further their education at local institutions and find stable jobs. They created a pilot project in 2017 where they tried to help a group of 16 deportees re-establish themselves in Mexico, giving them social services, helping them find somewhere to live, and jobs. Project director Paulina Olvera said despite making progress, some participants still decided their best opportunities were in the US. "One of them called us and said we're crossing. We said let us know when you make it across. We never heard anything from him," she said.

Key finding and Recommendations

- Migrants and deportees on the Mexico side of the southern US border need a steady stream of up-to-date information related to the shifting immigration policies in the United States. This includes information about policies related to asylum seekers, family separation, rights for those in detention, the difference between civil and criminal charges in relationship to crossing the border illegally, and more.

- Migrants and deportees need up to date information about what services are available to them on the Mexican side of the border including where shelters are located and what their rules are, how to apply for a humanitarian visa in Mexico, work opportunities, and how to locate lawyers who can help with a variety of migration related issues.

- Migrants and deportees in Tijuana generally have access to a smart phone, or at the very least a computer lab run by a local shelter that they can use to connect with family members, social services, and other primary information.

- Additional research should include a closer look at migrant and deportee access to local newspapers and other media in border areas that might be resources for communicating important news and information related to border migration issues.

- Tijuana non-profit Espacio Migrante is actively looking for funding and logistical support to reach more migrants and deportees with information she has about peoples options at the border. Project head Paulina Olveras said she's surveyed migrants and deportees who have accessed her services, and most want information about immigration paperwork, access to health care, harassment by the local police, employment and shelter. Espacio Migrante spoke of wanting to set up a text messaging service they can offer migrants and deportees to both reach out to regarding updates on local social

services, migration focused community meetings, and to answer key questions people may have regarding their situation. She also is looking for a new home office so she can set up a computer lab for migrants and deportees.

- Immigration lawyer Daniel Briebriescas is also looking for support for a project with a local student to produce a series of videos that educate migrants and deportees about their legal rights. The goal is to both disseminate these on websites for local migrant service providers, and to set up showings at migrant shelters where they'll have a captive audience.

- There is currently no dedicated information service for migrants and deportees where they can get answers to their questions related to staying in Tijuana or crossing into the United States. There is a group of local migrant service providers in Tijuana that are in touch via a WhatsApp group, and generally trying to keep up with what others are doing. There is also a Facebook service, El Jaguar, created by UNHCR that migrants can share questions with and get answers about resources they need.

- A more in-depth survey would expand to other locations along the border, namely the El Paso/Juarez border area, to learn from additional migrant service providers, and speak to more migrants and deportees about their ongoing and changing information needs. Further research would also include speaking with additional legal-aid providers on the US side of the border who are dealing with asylum, deportation, and family separation cases.

Methodology

Making sense of the inevitable information chaos in a crisis starts by listening to the affected population. It is critical to find out what information people need and what they are not getting. A parallel track of inquiry examines the local context, what we call the information ecosystem. This local ecosystem will have its own particular nuances, strengths and weaknesses. And perhaps most importantly, its areas of trust and influence. The information ecosystem is composed of the physical, social and institutional infrastructures that support information production and flow, including media outlets, government agencies, community groups, and local organic news sharing. It includes the information needs and

gaps experienced by local residents in both an immediate and ongoing context, and the topics that are of primary interest. The ecosystem also considers where a community's trust lies in terms of their ability to ask questions and get answers and information regarding the issues impacting their day to day existence.

In the case of this assessment, researcher Jesse Hardman began his research by contacting a migrant rights organization with offices in both the US and Mexico called Pueblo Sin Fronteras, which has been organizing migrant caravans the past few years to help Central Americans seeking relief from violence in their home countries safe passage to the US border. Staff at that office connected him with some of the migrant and deportee service providers in Tijuana including: Al Otro Lado, Espacio Migrante, and Enclave Caracol. Hardman also met with the Border Angels, a non-profit that operates out of San Diego and Tijuana, providing relief services to people migrating from Mexico and Central America. Utilizing an ICRC funded migration map developed for Central Americans crossing the Guatemala border into Mexico, Hardman reached out to shelters listed in Tijuana, and visited with both Casa del Migrante and Madre Assunta, where he spoke with an immigration lawyer that serves women and children who are migrating or who have been deported. He also spoke to 10 migrants who were either planning to cross illegally into the US or seek asylum at the border.