

ASYLUM POLICIES OF EXPULSION AND GRASSROOTS REFUGEE  
GOVERNANCE AT THE US-MEXICO BORDER

by

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Description
AEDPA	Anti-terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act
CAP	Criminal Alien Program
CBP	US Customs and Border Protection
DACA	Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals
DHS	US Department of Homeland Security
DTO	Drug-Trafficking Organizations
GRM	Global Response Management
HRC	Humanitarian Respite Center
ICE	US Immigration and Customs Enforcement
IIRIRA	Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act
INM	National Migration Institute of Mexico (Instituto Nacional de Migración)
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRCA	Immigration Reform and Control Act
LAMP	Latin American Mobilities Project
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer community



MPP	Migrant Protection Protocols
NGO	Non-governmental organizations
Northern Triangle	Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras
OMM	One Mission Ministries
RGV	Rio Grande Valley
TRAC	Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

## **ABSTRACT**

During the Trump presidency, US immigration policies of deterrence were transformed into asylum policies of expulsion, manifesting in policies such as the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) and Title 42. MPP, also known as “Remain in Mexico,” turned away over 70,000 asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border, leaving them homeless, waiting indefinitely in dangerous border cities for their asylum hearings. The asylum seekers in Matamoros formed an informal refugee camp that demonstrated the severity of this policy-induced crisis and became an important site for analyzing the impacts of MPP on asylum seekers. As the US turned away asylum seekers, a community of advocates united in the border communities of Brownsville, USA and Matamoros, Mexico. Using qualitative methods, this research analyzes the impacts of MPP asking the following research questions: 1) Drawing on the case study of Matamoros, Mexico, how did the implementation of MPP and Title 42 impact asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border? 2) How did humanitarian aid workers, immigration lawyers, medical service providers, and asylum seekers organize in response to the lack of state protection and social services for asylum seekers? By focusing on the Matamoros asylum seeker camp, this research highlights the lived experiences of asylum seekers who suffer the consequences of US immigration policies such as MPP and Title 42. Additionally, this research emphasizes the role of local communities in addressing international problems such as the humanitarian crisis triggered by US immigration policy.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Under the Trump Administration, some of the most restrictive immigration policies were put into effect. Trump's office intensified existing policies of deterrence, with severe consequences for migrants who attempted to cross the border (Garrett, 2020). Beginning with separation of migrant families at the border through Zero-Tolerance, the Trump Administration committed itself to an anti-immigration stance. During President Trump's term, policies of deterrence transformed into policies of expulsion, manifesting in the practice of metering, the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), and Title 42 (Blue et al., 2021). Under these policies, asylum seekers were no longer able to present themselves at US ports of entry to request asylum. Presenting this legitimate method to enter the US as a loophole, the Trump Administration began to deny migrants the opportunity to seek asylum. The result was that thousands of asylum seekers were expelled to Mexican border cities to wait indefinitely for the chance to seek asylum in the US.

By the end of the first iteration of MPP on June 1, 2021, the US-Mexico border had established asylum seeker camps in Mexican border cities with over 70,000 migrants in total registered in the program (Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse [TRAC], 2021). MPP asylum seekers resorted to a variety of precarious living situations while waiting in Mexico, but many resided in informal camps, not officially recognized as refugee camps in the border cities of Reynosa and Matamoros. Among the MPP camps, the one that formed in Matamoros, Mexico was an important location for analyzing the impacts of MPP on migrants attempting to seek asylum in the US. While MPP camps formed all along the US-Mexico border in response to the growing number of asylum

seekers waiting in the MPP program, the Matamoros camp acutely demonstrated the severity of the crisis. Those enrolled in MPP were sent back to Mexico without secure housing to wait until they would return for their court dates in the US. In the border cities, migrants were susceptible to rape, kidnapping, murder, and recruitment from drug trafficking organizations (Slack & Martinez, 2020; Blue et al., 2021). Due to a multitude of factors that marginalize them, asylum seekers have been particularly vulnerable to drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs), which identify migrants as easy targets of violence and extortion. MPP directly endangered migrants by abandoning them without any resources in areas dominated by cartel violence (Blue et al., 2021). As a result, it was practically an expectation that migrants would be victimized in some way by cartels during their migration or at the border. Given this context, it was inhumane for the US to implement policies and procedures that left asylum seekers indefinitely in Mexico without any support.

Until the end of Trump's office, neither the US nor Mexico requested the help of international organizations to help the asylum seekers. International organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are essential for addressing humanitarian crises around the world. In the absence of state-led action or assistance from international organizations, the advocates and volunteers living in Brownsville and the surrounding border region responded to the crisis that they saw before their eyes. The local lawyers, teachers and other volunteers formed a community of advocates that grew over time, bringing in others from across Texas and the US including engineers, lawyers, and healthcare professionals to protect the asylum seekers living in Matamoros, Mexico. Working with the asylum seekers, they established a

grassroots refugee governance system at the local level to provide the survival necessities for the asylum seekers.

Through the collaboration of a network of volunteers, advocates and asylum seekers established and operated a camp that would shelter and provide for thousands of asylum seekers with the camp population peaking at 2,000 people. The legal team, health care providers, engineers, religious workers, teachers, other volunteers, and asylum seekers themselves were key actors in the function and organization of the camp. From early 2019, when MPP was first implemented until it was initially terminated in May 2021, the camp was an important site of mobilization among the asylum seekers and local volunteers. Even after the dismantling of the camp, asylum seekers and members of the Brownsville and Matamoros communities remained significant advocates for asylum seekers who have continued to arrive at the border and those who were not able to cross. While the camp was important for drawing awareness to the impacts of US asylum policy, fostered solidarity, and provided a space for circumscribed yet meaningful collective organizing and agency, it was in reality very dangerous and insecure.

One of Biden's first objectives as president was to terminate MPP. After his inauguration, he officially suspended the program the next day on January 21, 2021. In February, the US began crossing asylum seekers with pending MPP cases (American Immigration Council, 2022a). Of the over 70,000 asylum seekers with MPP cases, only the 25,000 with open cases were initially eligible to cross and pursue their cases in the US (US Department of Homeland Security [DHS], 2021). In early June, the process opened up to MPP asylum seekers who had been deported for missing their court hearings (American Immigration Council, 2022a). Previously, the US and Mexico had declined to invite the

United Nations (UN) to facilitate processing asylum seekers. However, by late February, the National Migration Institute of Mexico (INM) had coordinated with the UN to begin registering the camp with US border officials and begin the asylum process (Harrison-Cripps, 2021). At this time, the US and Mexico finally involved international organizations in addressing the humanitarian crisis at the border.

On February 25, 2021, the first 27 asylum-seekers from the Matamoros camp were screened for COVID-19 and allowed to cross the border with US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) (Harrison-Cripps, 2021). All migrants who qualified had to register through an online platform, and UN officials stated about 12,000 people registered in its first three days of operation. In addition to registration by the UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) conducted COVID-19 tests to ensure protection of public health while the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) was ensuring humane treatment of children and their families. These organizations became involved at the request of the US and Mexican governments, and while 750 people in the Matamoros camp had been prioritized due to the dire conditions, other officials began the process of crossing asylum seekers at ports of entry all along the border (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2021). The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) warned however that migrants not come straight to the border because of the need to screen migrants for COVID-19 before allowing them to enter (Stancil, 2021). With the collaboration of these organizations and US agencies, the last remaining asylum seekers in the camp with active MPP cases were crossed to the US by the end of March 2021 after waiting from months up to two years in the camp.

These first steps towards restoring the asylum process were followed by challenges in the Texas and US Supreme Courts. In August of 2021, a federal court in Texas ordered DHS to reimplement MPP on the basis that the DHS memo terminating MPP did not comply with the Administrative Procedure Act and the Immigration Nationality Act (INA) (DHS, 2022b). Following this order, the Biden Administration implemented MPP 2.0, which would start sending asylum seekers back to Mexico under the program beginning in December of 2021 (American Immigration Council, 2022a). With the court decisions undermining the rights of asylum seekers revolving around MPP, the situation at the border has been turbulent for asylum seekers.

The Biden Administration's revised MPP included some improvements to the original iteration, but the core issues remained. For example, MPP 2.0 expanded the nationalities it applied to, encompassing all asylum seekers coming from the Western Hemisphere except for Mexicans (American Immigration Council, 2022a). MPP 2.0 also included a broader use of exemptions including for LGBTQ asylum seekers and those with disabilities. The Biden Administration made attempts to improve legal access and due process for asylum seekers, but MPP 2.0 did not last much longer to analyze the extent of improvement. On June 30<sup>th</sup>, the Supreme Court decided in a 5-4 ruling in *Biden v. Texas* that the DHS under Biden did in fact hold the authority to terminate MPP (DHS, 2022a). DHS reiterated the flaws of MPP in a statement addressing the Supreme Court's decision in favor the Biden Administration (DHS, 2022a). However, it concluded with a reminder that the US would maintain Title 42, which turns away asylum seekers at the border.

Initial efforts to repair the asylum system have been stalled due to lack of political will and ongoing legal challenges to reinstate MPP. As the humanitarian crises leading migrants to leave home has remained, more migrants have arrived at the border in desperate need of protection. Ordinary people from the border communities have worked with the asylum seekers to help them survive the dangerous conditions in Mexican border cities while waiting to seek asylum in the face of state policies that neglected asylum seekers and increased their vulnerability and insecurity. Local and grassroots organizations continued to support the remaining and incoming asylum seekers without the help of the US, Mexico, or UN organizations.

While the political situation was bleak, there was hope to be found in the US-Mexico border communities. In spite of vast challenges, community members have continued to advocate, and asylum seekers have fought to survive. Individuals in the Brownsville and Matamoros communities have organized to provide a variety of survival services to asylum seekers in Mexico. In response to the humanitarian crisis that US policies have created and exacerbated, grassroots refugee governance has emerged. As the state frames its policies around deterrence and militarization, effectively diminishing access to asylum, ordinary people took on the great challenge of providing for the asylum seekers. As these individuals took the initiative to do what is right, asylum seekers themselves used their circumscribed agency to advocate for themselves. In the direst conditions defining the Matamoros MPP camp, grassroots structures of governance and humanitarian service provision emerged.

While ordinary people accomplished extraordinary feats of advocacy and support at the border, this dynamic was not sustainable. Immigration reform has been necessary.



Powerful countries around the world have decimated the global asylum system making immigration reform a prescient need in both the US and around the world (Mountz, 2020). Using the case study of asylum seekers in Matamoros, Mexico, this thesis demonstrates the devastating impacts of the US's immigration policies on asylum seekers entering from the southern border. This research analyzes the following questions: 1) Drawing on the case study of Matamoros, Mexico, how did the implementation of MPP and Title 42 impacted asylum-seekers at the U.S.-Mexico border? 2) How did humanitarian aid workers, immigration lawyers, medical service providers, and asylum-seekers organize in response to the lack of state protection and social services for asylum seekers?

To answer these questions, I traveled with a team to Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Mexico to volunteer with local organizations and shelters during the summer of 2021. I did fieldwork while volunteering with Global Response Management, a free medical clinic for asylum seekers in Matamoros; Team Brownsville, an organization in Brownsville serving asylum seekers on both sides of the border; two large shelters in Matamoros affiliated with churches; and a small shelter serving LGBTQ asylum seekers. I recorded observations at each site and helped to collect a total of 45 interviews over the course of three trips to the border. I also used 12 interviews with volunteers and service providers collected by Dr. Sarah Blue and Dr. Jennifer Devine during 2020. This secondary data provides valuable insights about the transborder community and about the MPP camp as it had already been dismantled by the time I went to Matamoros. I used open coding methods to analyze for themes across my field notes and interview transcripts.

This thesis argues two main points. First, the US has created a humanitarian crisis at the US-Mexico border that endangers asylum seekers in desperate need of protection. The analysis illuminates the failures of US immigration policy that led to tremendous hardship for migrants in Mexico and spatially manifested in the makeshift MPP camp housing thousands of asylum seekers in Matamoros. Second, I contend in response to the lack of state or UN service provisions, asylum seekers and their grassroots allies have filled the void, creating what I call a grassroots refugee governance system. Ordinary individuals in border communities have done more to protect asylum seekers than states with legal humanitarian obligations to asylum. While local communities have been successful in helping the asylum seekers survive MPP, only the US is capable of providing meaningful protection to refugees. The goal of this thesis is to call for fundamental changes to the asylum system that would treat refugees with dignity and justice.

This research draws on and contributes to the literature on US immigration policies of expulsion and grassroots migrant social movements. By focusing on the Matamoros asylum seeker camp, this research highlights the lived experiences of asylum seekers who suffer the consequences of US immigration policies such as MPP and Title 42. Additionally, this research emphasizes the role of local communities in addressing international problems such as the humanitarian crisis triggered by US and Mexico immigration policy. The story of the Matamoros asylum seekers is important because their experience is not an anomaly; around the world heads of state are raising legal and physical barriers to migrants and increasingly limiting asylum (Maillet et al., 2018). This “death of asylum” is causing immense suffering to millions of people in desperate need

of protection (Mountz, 2020). Research on asylum is increasingly important to understand the burdens on asylum seekers as well as the grassroots communities of advocates who protect these vulnerable migrants as the state abandons them. Currently, US immigration policies not only include endless barriers to asylum, but also, they actively endanger asylum seekers in Mexico by forcing them to wait in border towns to legally enter the country to request asylum. This thesis expands these bodies of literature by demonstrating the impacts of policies of expulsion and the agency of advocates and asylum seekers.

The structure of the thesis is as follows: background, literature review, methods, two sections of analysis, and a conclusion of this research. Starting with the background in Chapter II, I review US intervention in Central America, the history of US immigration policies, the context of the border region, and the Trump Administration's asylum policies. Next, I review the relevant literature to this research in Chapter III. I focus on two bodies of literature: 1) the shift from deportation to expulsion, and 2) the grassroots migrant social movement. I follow with the methods section in Chapter IV elaborating on my fieldwork in Brownsville and Matamoros and the methods of analysis. The analysis is divided into two broad sections separated into Chapter IV and Chapter V. The first describes how US policy produced the humanitarian crisis at the border that manifested in the Matamoros camp. I describe the social dynamics of the camp and outline the hardships that asylum seekers experienced there. The second half of the analysis highlights the community of volunteers and asylum seekers who came together to protect these refugees. I discuss the role of each population and the limitations they encountered

in service provision. Finally, the conclusion in Chapter VI revisits the research questions and summarizes the response argued throughout the analysis chapters.

## II. BACKGROUND: CONTEXTUALIZING THE MPP CAMP IN US INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The US has approached foreign policy with Central American countries (Figure 1) for hundreds of years with a superiority complex. Building on the colonial legacies left behind by European powers, the US drew on their strategies and asserted a false superiority over Latin America. The conditions today that drive migration from Central America to the US are a product of past US intervention in the politics and economics of these countries. Contemporary immigration policies initiated under the Trump Administration are only the most recent chapter in the long history between the US and Central America. US involvement in Central America, particularly in the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador), over centuries has destabilized this region.



Figure 1. Map of Central America. Source: © www.freeworldmaps.net 2005-2021  
<https://www.freeworldmaps.net/centralamerica/central-america-map-hd.jpg>

The Monroe Doctrine, established by President James Monroe in 1823, set a precedent for US dominance. Addressing Europe, this statement argued the US had the sole right to colonize the Americas and neglected to acknowledge the sovereign rights of the native peoples and newly independent nations throughout the Western Hemisphere (Chomsky, 2021). President Theodore Roosevelt later augmented Monroe's stance stating that, "chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may... ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and... may force the United States... to the exercise of an international police power" (National Archives, 2022). Despite presenting intervention as a last resort, these presidents justified the decades of US intervention in Central America that would completely disrupt the progress of these countries and set the stage for destabilization.

The US aims to forget its history of intervention. Erasing the past obfuscates the US's role in forced migration from Central America. The US has justified its immigration policies by denying the historical context that drives migration. None of these policies operate in a historical or geographical vacuum. As stated by historian Aviva Chomsky, "People in [Central America] don't have the luxury of ignoring or forgetting what is going on in the United States because they know that US presidential elections, policy decisions, and economic developments are likely to deeply affect them" (2021, p. 19). The geographies and histories of Central America are deeply intertwined with the US.

During the Cold War, the US especially exhibited unnecessary force in Central America. In the name of protecting Central America from Communism, the US was a driving force in overthrowing democratically elected leaders. By installing and funding dictators and military juntas, the US ensured the governments in Central America would

prioritize US economic and political interests. In the midst of severe human rights violations under these authoritarian regimes, the US repeatedly funded and armed the Guatemalan, Nicaraguan, and Salvadoran militaries to uphold the status quo and quash revolution (Chomsky, 2021). This history of intervention has maintained corrupt and oppressive governments in Central America. Past violence has fueled the violence driven by the DTOs in the region as the chronically corrupt governments only respond with impunity.

These geopolitical factors play a significant role in asylum cases in the US. A country's relationship with the US matters when refugees are fleeing that country. Slack (2019) discusses the disparities between asylum outcomes among Chinese, Mexican, and Central American asylum seekers to demonstrate the influence of geopolitical factors on asylum outcomes. Because of the US criticism of China's human rights record, the asylum denial rate is low for Chinese asylum seekers. On the other hand, Mexican asylum seekers have the highest denial rate likely due to the US's close ties with its neighbor. The US also has low acceptance of Central American asylum cases as part of denying its involvement in the region's instability. To avoid acknowledging past wrongdoing, the US rejects Central American refugees at a higher rate than those from other countries. Menjívar (2021) offers racism as another explanation for asylum outcome disparities. She notes the ways that immigration enforcement and media reify the racialization of illegality that associates Latinos with illegal immigration (Menjívar, 2021). Further, US intervention has triggered immigration out of many different regions proving this dynamic is not unique to Central America but has also occurred with asylum seekers from Vietnam and the Dominican Republic for example (Golash-Boza, 2011).

Geopolitical and social factors often play a more critical role in asylum outcomes than the details of an individual's case.

### **History of US Immigration Policy**

US immigration policies designed to exclude particular groups based on nationality are historically rooted in nativist and xenophobic sentiments. Immigration policies implemented in 1921 and 1924 focused on excluding Asian immigrants in particular but also heavily limited the number of Eastern Europeans allowed to immigrate to fill limited quotas based on national origin (Wasem, 2020). The immigration quotas were based on the existing number of immigrants living in the US using 1890 census data that captured the peak of Western European immigration and thus favored Western and Northern Europeans to the exclusion of Eastern and Southern European immigrants as well as Asian immigrants. In 1942, the US repealed the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, allowing Chinese nationals to apply for US citizenship (Migration Policy Institute, 2013). The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 established some of the characteristics of the immigration system in the United States by outlining who can immigrate, how many people, and for what reasons (Golash-Boza, 2011). Further, the Immigration Nationality Act of 1965 implemented a quota system for immigrants from the Western Hemisphere and spurred migration from Asia to the US through family reunification programs for refugees and its emphasis on skilled labor (Golash-Boza, 2011).

By the 1970s, the US began progress toward cohesive reform (Wasem, 2020). The US passed the Refugee Act of 1980 which defining a refugee as a person who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin based on past experiences of



persecution or a “well-founded fear of persecution” on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or particular opinion (American Immigration Policy 2021b). Since then, the US has demonstrated patterns of admitting asylum seekers based on state-based persecution rather than on violence from non-state actors causing displacement. FitzGerald and Arar (2018) discuss this interpretation of refugees as a realist approach that conceptualize refugees purely based on legal definitions. This limited definition ignores the sociological origins of forced displacement, including the violence against from armed gangs that often catalyze refugee flows from Central America (FitzGerald & Arar, 2018). Since 9/11 especially, the US has shifted further towards a national security approach regarding asylum and refugee policy (Blitz, 2017; Finnegan et al., 2010). Generally, asylum and refugee policy in the US has not been formulated based on a human rights framework but rather to navigate geopolitical conditions (Blitz, 2017).

Since the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), the US has increasingly militarized the Southern border with Mexico and expanded Border Patrol staff (Abrego et al., 2017; Menjivar et al., 2018). The pattern of policies triggering militarization at the border has coincided with restrictions on asylum as well. The Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA) changed the process for asylum seekers and increased barriers to gaining asylum (Wasem, 2020). Both IIRIRA and the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) made 1996 a critical year in intensifying the criminalization of immigration (Abrego et al., 2017). These two laws broadened the definition of “aggravated felonies” to include petty misdemeanors, such as shoplifting, to accelerate the deportation process. Asylum and

immigration policy in the US followed this trajectory of restriction and militarization for two decades (1996-2016) but saw fundamental change under the Trump Administration through moves away from international laws and norms.

### **Trump Administration's Policies of Expulsion**

The Trump Administration's Zero Tolerance, MPP, and Asylum Cooperation Agreement policies as well as the expanded border wall compounded the suffering that migrants experience at the US-Mexico border (Garrett, 2020). Under the Trump Administration, exclusionary asylum policy particularly affected Central Americans from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador (Robert Center for International Security and Law [Strauss Center], 2018; Blue et al., 2021). Additionally, the transient nature of migrants' movement made them especially vulnerable to drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs) (Slack, 2019). The Trump Administration's xenophobic rhetoric has translated to policies like "zero tolerance" and the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) or "Remain in Mexico" (Wasem, 2020). Asylum seekers who would come to the International Gateway Bridge between the two cities and would be sent back to wait in Matamoros (See Figure 2). The reality for asylum seekers under MPP was that rather than waiting in the US while seeking asylum, they must wait in dangerous border towns in Mexico where migrants in particular were vulnerable to DTOs.

Beginning with the Zero Tolerance Policy first implemented in March 2018, any migrants, including asylum seekers, who attempted to cross the border outside of a port of entry would be detained and separated from their children who were traveling with them (Refugees International, 2018). These children were then sent to Office of Refugee

Resettlement (ORR) shelters distant from their parents (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2022). In response to widespread criticism, President Trump issued an executive order ending the program in June 2018. Soon after, US District Judge Dana Sabraw issued a preliminary injunction to obligate reunification of separated families and end the separation of families except for under circumstances in which the parents endanger the child (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2022). However, US immigration agencies continued to carry out this practice despite the official end of the policy. In response to Zero Tolerance, many migrant families began presenting themselves at ports of entry to claim asylum and avoid detention, which developed into a waiting system that would become metering (Garrett, 2020). This process of family separation remained an element of the asylum policies and procedures that followed Zero Tolerance (Garrett, 2020).

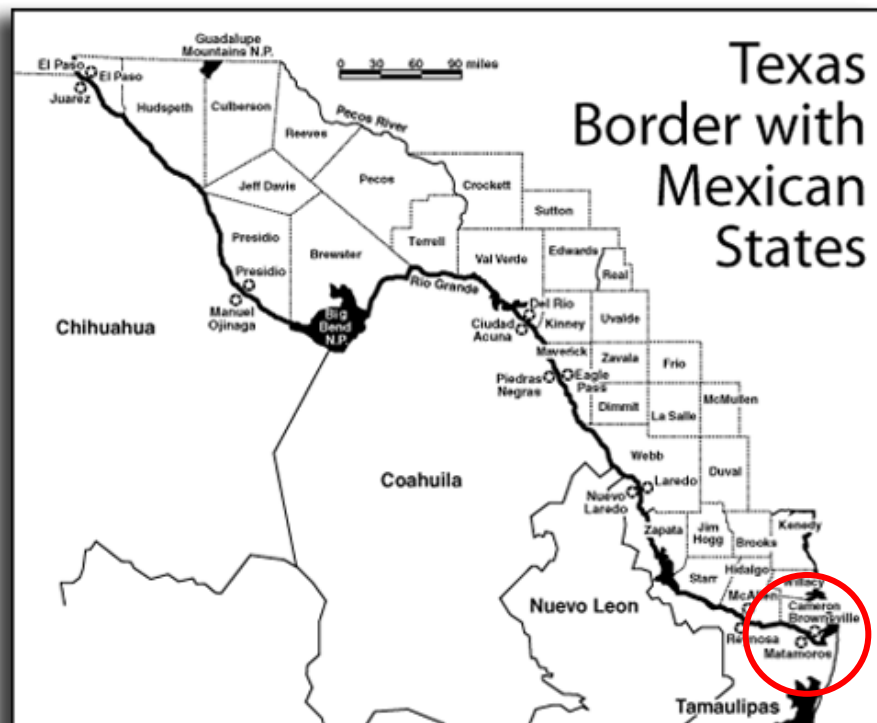


Figure 2. Map of Texas-Mexico border cities. Source: Texas Commission for Environmental Quality (TCEQ) Border Initiative, <https://www.tceq.texas.gov/publications/gi/gi-392.html>; modified with circle indicating location of Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Tamaulipas (Mexico)

Beginning in 2016, as President Obama's term came to an end, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials turned back asylum seekers at their discretion along the border but primarily at the San Ysidro port of entry (American Immigration Council, 2021a). CBP officials claimed that the asylum turnbacks, which became known as metering, were necessary when a single port of entry would receive large numbers of asylum seekers if the agency lacked the capacity to process all of the asylum seekers (American Immigration Council, 2021a). Under the process of metering, CBP limited the number of people who could seek asylum at a port of entry per day and turned away the rest of the people who would arrive. In response, various groups in Mexico including the National Migration Institute (Instituto Nacional de Migración, INM) Grupo Beta; the Mexican government's humanitarian agency for migrants, local shelters, and asylum seekers started to manage lists to keep track of the order of asylum seekers arriving to ports of entry (Strauss Center, 2018).

CBP implemented metering differently at each port of entry with various groups managing the metering lists and informing asylum seekers when it was their turn to come back to the port of entry. In Matamoros, there were two bridges, the Gateway International Bridge and the Brownsville and Matamoros Express International Bridge (B&M Bridge), where asylum seekers could make their asylum claims (Strauss Center, 2018). Even at the local scale, CBP operated metering differently at each bridge. At the Gateway Bridge, INM and Grupo Beta formally managed the metering list. Though the list initially was managed by a civil society group, from November 2018 on, asylum seekers kept track of their order for those at the B&M Bridge (Strauss Center, 2018). At that point, the fewer asylum seekers were waiting at the B&M Bridge than at the

Gateway bridge, but the exact number is uncertain. However, approximately 283 asylum seekers were waiting on the Gateway Bridge list as of late November 2018 (Strauss Center, 2018).

The practice of metering became formalized under MPP (Slack & Martinez, 2020; American Immigration Council, 2021a). MPP has been aptly nicknamed “Remain in Mexico” as it forced asylum seekers who legally come to the border to wait out the asylum process in Mexico rather than in the US on parole as before. This policy was misrepresented by the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as a humanitarian intervention, but in actuality, this policy has subjected tens of thousands to the dangerous environment along the Mexican border that has emerged under the control of drug-trafficking organizations (Garrett, 2020).

Most asylum seekers under MPP were unable to access legal assistance while in Mexico and as a result were unable to navigate the courts--of the 70,000 MPP cases, less than 7,000 individuals had legal representation (TRAC, 2020). Access to an attorney is critical for an asylum seeker to navigate a legal system set up against them. However, human rights challenges in court from the ACLU and other organizations have challenged policies like Title 42, attempting to gain relief and justice for the asylum seekers (Rodríguez, 2021). The legal system is at the heart of the asylum crisis in the United States as asylum seekers fight for their human rights in a system rigged against them.

MPP took a striking turn violating the principle of non-refoulement in international law, which blocks states’ right to expel asylum seekers to a country where they will face serious danger based on persecution according to their “race, religion,

nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” (UNHCR, 1977). Advocates of asylum seeking, privileging human rights, rely on the principle of non-refoulement as a legal basis for asylum. In the past, asylum seekers had to prove “credible fear” of persecution due to these conditions in their home country. Under MPP, to enter the US asylum seekers must prove not only credible fear of persecution in their country of origin but also in Mexico (Wasem, 2020). While asylum officers did not explicitly ask asylum seekers if they had a fear of waiting in Mexico, the asylum seekers had to confirm credible fear of returning to Mexico in order to be removed from MPP (American Immigration Council 2022). DTOs have routinely recruited, kidnapped, raped, and murdered migrants in Mexico (Slack, 2019). The desperation that many migrants in the MPP camps faced also drove them to seek assistance from DTOs to enter the US illegally, which led to an increase in drownings in the river (Blue et al., 2021). These conditions are an indication of how MPP violated the principle of non-refoulement and thus the rights of asylum seekers.

Building on MPP, which expelled asylum seekers from remaining on US territory, when the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in the US in March 2020, the US invoked Title 42 to completely close the border for asylum (Garrett, 2020). The U.S. weaponized the COVID-19 pandemic through Title 42 to halt the asylum process entirely (Blue et al. 2021). Title 42 is a section of US code dating back to 1944 that authorizes the director of the Center for Disease Control (CDC) to close the border to migrants, asylum seekers included, with the justification of preventing the spread of disease (Gramlich, 2022). Although there are reports of opposition from CDC scientists as well as critiques from other public health experts, the CDC implemented Title 42 to close the border to asylum

seekers starting in March 2020 (American Immigration Council, 2022b). The border closure has targeted asylum seekers and suspended the MPP courts indefinitely (Blue et al., 2021). Although Title 42 was set to be terminated in April 2022, a Louisiana federal court prevented the Biden Administration from acting (American Immigration Council, 2022b). As of July 2022, Title 42 remains in place.

Since President Biden was inaugurated, the administration has taken steps towards dismantling MPP and reevaluating the asylum-seeking process (DHS, 2022b). However, many of President Biden's efforts towards asylum reform were stifled in the courts. While terminating MPP was one of the Biden Administration's first priorities, a federal court in Texas ruled that the DHS lacked the authority to end MPP (DHS, 2022b). On June 30, 2022, the US Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Biden Administration and has affirmed the authority of the executive to rescind MPP (DHS, 2022a). This decision provides hope for a future without MPP and Title 42.

### **III. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This thesis draws on and contributes to two bodies of literature that are outlined in this chapter. First, this chapter reviews the literature on US immigration policies of deportation and expulsion. Understanding the history of these policies and the impacts they have on Latino migrants especially is essential for framing the humanitarian crisis caused by MPP. This thesis contributes a case study illustrating the impacts of recent US immigration policies on the asylum seekers in Matamoros, Mexico that echoes the circumstances of displaced people around the world. Second, this review covers the literature on global grassroots migrant social movements that prioritize the needs of migrants and advocates for their humanity. This thesis supplements the literature on border communities' advocacy for migrants. Additionally, it contributes evidence of migrants' advocacy for each other and emphasizes their agency. Other research has focused on migrants' experience as victims or recipients of humanitarian care, but I elaborate on asylum seekers' role in their advocacy and community-building. These bodies of literature inform this thesis, providing a foundation for literature investigating the tension between local agency and state power.

#### **Deportation to Expulsion**

Historically, US immigration policy is rooted in racism exemplified by legislation like the Chinese Exclusion Act (Wasem, 2020). However, many policies racialize Latino immigrants and citizens alike putting them at a quantifiable disadvantage in the US immigration system (Menjívar, 2021). While Asian migrants form the fastest growing undocumented population in the US, Latino migrants are disproportionately deported or



expelled at the border (Menjívar, 2021). US media and politicians racialize undocumented migrants as Latino, stigmatizing this community.

The racialization of illegality has implications for Latino migrants and citizens, and this dynamic is compounded by the criminalization of immigration. Criminalization of immigration was implemented at a large scale beginning with US President Reagan's Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 (Abrego et al., 2017; Menjívar et al., 2018). While this policy granted amnesty to six million undocumented immigrants, it criminalized intentionally hiring undocumented migrants and expanded militarization of the border (Menjívar et al., 2018). Such policies aimed at deterrence intensified uneven enforcement of immigration law within the borders of the US in the form of workplace raids and deportation (Gorman & Wilson, 2021). As subsequent laws expanded the definition of deportable offenses, life became more precarious for migrants on their journey to the border as well as for undocumented migrants living within the borders of the US.

Policies aimed at deterrence have made life for migrants unnecessarily dangerous. As geographer Alison Mountz sums up the situation, "Governments are complicit in migrant deaths due to their heavy investments in border enforcement and detention... Deterrence is perhaps the most expensive and lasting public policy failure of our time" (2020, xiv). Jeremy Slack's (2019) ethnographic research of deportees highlights the dangers that deportees and migrants experience in the borderlands. Processes of removal through the Criminal Alien Program (CAP), for example, purposefully disorient migrants by deporting them to some of the most dangerous regions of the Mexican border regardless of where they entered the US (Slack & Martinez, 2020). Additionally, many

migrants accrue heavy debts if they fail to arrive and work in the US, leading them to make multiple attempts (Johnson & Woodhouse, 2018). Deterrence policies do not effectively prevent migrants from coming to the US but rather intensify the dangers that the migrants experience during their migration.

Under the Trump Administration, the US amplified previous presidents' deterrence policies. Further, new policies transitioned from practices of "detention and deportation" to "expulsion and exclusion" (Blue et al., 2021). This means that rather than being detained and more often than not later deported as under previous regimes, policies of expulsion expel asylum seekers from the US and prevent them from entering the country all together. Remain in Mexico and Title 42, implemented by Trump, expel asylum seekers arriving at the border and require them to wait indefinitely in Mexico to pursue their asylum case. These policies exemplify the US-led, global trend of states crafting immigration policies of exclusion that force asylum seekers to wait in limbo at borders (Menjívar et al., 2018). Worldwide, recipient countries are rejecting migrant asylum-seekers and essentially expanding their territory by forcing asylum-seekers to wait outside of their borders while pursuing asylum status (Maillet et al., 2018).

Indefinite waiting has become the norm rather than the exception for refugees (Hyndman & Giles, 2011). Despite Mexican policies that appear to be humanitarian, the US has influenced Mexico's actual practices to the point that it serves as a buffer zone in the interest of US immigration agendas (FitzGerald, 2019). During the Trump Administration, the US also created Asylum Cooperation Agreements with Guatemala and other countries to expedite removal of asylum seekers from the US-Mexico border (Garrett, 2020). As the US has invested in detention facilities and border militarization, it

has likewise divested from resettlement and integration for asylum seekers and refugees (Mountz, 2020). Canada, Australia, and the EU have followed the U.S. in crafting policies of exclusion that have led to many migrant deaths and unnecessary suffering (Mountz, 2020). US-led policies of expulsion have become widespread and result in dehumanizing outcomes for asylum seekers.

As deterrence has failed to address root causes of forced migration, it does not prevent displaced people from seeking out protection in other countries. Instead, it increases the risk that asylum seekers and all migrants face in their migration journeys (Mountz, 2020). While this thesis focuses on the realities for asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border, this dynamic is occurring around the world. For decades wealthy countries have crafted policies to deter asylum seekers at their borders and have developed a deterrence paradigm in handling immigration (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Tan, 2016). In Europe, the Dublin Convention of 1990 informed many of the European Union's (EU) subsequent responses to influxes of asylum seekers by requiring migrants to seek asylum in the first country they arrive, which led many to travel to small island countries where they then must stay to seek asylum (Bousiou, 2020).

Without the option of a humanitarian visa, migrants have been forced to take the more dangerous sea routes to islands such as Lesbos in Greece where they are detained under horrible conditions (Bousiou, 2020). The EU's policies sacrifice the rights of asylum seekers and fail to implement burden-sharing mechanisms to ensure that it is not a few countries poorly managing Europe's asylum system on their own. Similarly, Australia has made attempts to keep out asylum seekers through offshore detention. Through exploitation of neighboring countries such as Papua New Guinea, Australia

neglects its responsibility in the refugee regime by refusing to resettle detained refugees (Mountz, 2020). Similar to many European countries and Australia, the US has relied on its neighboring countries to form a buffer zone to keep asylum seekers out of its borders (FitzGerald 2019). Gammeltoft-Hansen & Tan (2016) argue that wealthy states approaching global refugee protection from a deterrence paradigm have endangered asylum seekers in migration and placed the burden of the global refugee regime on low-income and middle-income states neighboring refugees' countries of origin. Further, the authors assert this unsuccessful paradigm sustained by states around the world reflects a crisis rooted in institutional failures rather than in the actual number of refugees (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Tan, 2016). The Trump Administration's attack on asylum has resulted in an ongoing humanitarian crisis at the US-Mexico border.

This thesis provides a case study demonstrating the impacts of policies of expulsion at the local level. The conditions in Matamoros, Mexico resonate with other asylum seekers' experiences of waiting and externalization of the asylum process. The MPP camp in Matamoros shows that the contemporary challenges asylum seekers face manifest at both local and global scales. This research elaborates the direct impacts of expulsive policies on asylum seekers and neighboring communities and advocates for policy change that centers a human rights approach.

### **Grassroots Migrant Social Movements**

From the state perspective, migrants challenge state sovereignty and states' rights to enforce their borders (Basok, 2009). Using this security framework, states prioritize border militarization and neglect humanitarian obligations to asylum. As a result, a

humanitarian crisis has formed at the US-Mexico border and has been exacerbated by US policy. The US-Mexico border in particular, has formed a space that has drawn humanitarian activism in response to state abuse of migrants. Many human rights activists along the border have witnessed the impacts in their communities and mobilized to form grassroots migrant social movements. As the US has implemented policies that increase hardship for migrants, humanitarians have organized in response. Johnson's (2015) qualitative research with No More Deaths volunteers in Arizona highlights the uniqueness of the border as a space that inspires volunteers to participate in activism and volunteer work. Transnational networks in San Diego and Tijuana bridge the US-Mexico border, amplifying each other's voices and engaging in a number of strategies to defend migrants' rights (Stoesslé et al., 2020). These networks have had to adjust their tactics to address the new policies and procedures that have been implemented for the first time under the Trump office. The main strategies that have emerged along the border networks include information sharing, training, and advocating for migrants and asylum seekers as new harmful policies emerge (Stoesslé et al., 2020).

The activism along the US-Mexico border is part of a global movement formed through networks at different scales advocating for migrants' rights (Mountz, 2020). In the Texas-Mexico border this dynamic is also occurring. In McAllen, Texas at the Humanitarian Respite Center (HRC), volunteers coordinate to provide necessary services to recently crossed asylum seekers but face daily unpredictability and instability in terms of the number of volunteers and supplies they have as well as the number of people they will serve (Glier et al., 2021). In the absence of state-led services or state-provided resources, ordinary people in border communities have mobilized to address the

humanitarian crisis that asylum seekers are experiencing. Further, in Matamoros, the displaced asylum seekers themselves mobilized and used their agency to resist state control of their mobility (Blue et al., 2021).

Emphasizing the significance of the grassroots movement, coordination between the grassroots organizations and local communities is key. When this coordination does not occur, harm can be done. For example, in the case of the *colonia* border communities, Dolhinow (2005) found that, despite attempts to intervene in the place of the state, NGOs may unintentionally reinforce neoliberal state policy when not paying close attention to the target community's needs. Asylum seekers and advocates must collaborate to leverage power against state authorities with the current state of asylum.

Some migrant rights activists, particularly “No Borders” advocates, call for serving with an ethos of solidarity over hospitality, which balances power dynamics between volunteer and migrant (Milner, 2011). Rather than reinforcing the insider/outsider binary, this approach is more inclusive of migrants and allows activists to collaborate with the migrants themselves to better address their needs (Milner, 2011). In response to COVID-19 border closure, sociologist Anna Triandafyllidou (2020) called for bridging this binary through transnational solidarity as states emphasize national solidarity through the exclusion of the most vulnerable “others,” asylum seekers and refugees. The grassroots migrant social movement is critical for eliminating this xenophobic binary.

In her examination of the “humanitarian border” that has formed along Arizona’s southern border, Williams (2015) highlights the integration of border enforcement into care for asylum seekers as service providers outside of the enforcement regime have

diminished over time. Discussing the encroachment of border patrol into humanitarians' roles, she emphasizes the ways that Customs & Border Protection (CBP) leadership has limited and even punished activists' work. Echoing Milner (2011), an ethos of solidarity in grassroots organizations is necessary to avoid these challenges.

In Matamoros and Brownsville, a grassroots migrant social movement emerged to address the acute, survival needs of asylum seekers. The Matamoros camp provided insights into how these movements respond and organize. A unique aspect of the camp and the local movement was the asylum seekers' level of involvement in their own care and protection. This thesis contributes evidence of refugees' constrained agency in one another's survival and asylum process. While acknowledging the limits of the grassroots movement, this thesis provides supportive evidence of asylum seekers' agency in the challenges they face.

## **IV. METHODS**

### **Site and Situation**

The research for this thesis took place over the course of three long-weekend trips to Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Tamaulipas during the summer of 2021. These trips were my first time visiting the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) and the US-Mexico border. Going to Brownsville and Matamoros, in Figure 3, clarified the significance of this research for me. I understood how the suffering of the asylum seekers in Matamoros had affected the Brownsville community and called locals to action. When visiting, you can see the evidence of the militarized border in the tall border fences, the number of Border Patrol personnel, and the interior border checkpoints that you must cross when leaving the border region. Matamoros is just a short walk across a bridge for Brownsville residents, and it is impossible to ignore the situation for asylum seekers in both cities. Crossing the bridge back and forth with ease as an American is striking after seeing thousands of people suffering and in need of asylum forced to wait in Matamoros under MPP and Title 42. The tremendous privilege of an American passport becomes obvious immediately. For those who live along the border, these disparities are unavoidable.

During my fieldwork in Brownsville and Matamoros, I witnessed the failures of US immigration policies that compound the hardships that migrants experience. These neighboring locations provided insight into the developing humanitarian crisis at the border. With rhetoric that has dehumanized migrants circling politics and media, too many people in the US lack sympathy for migrants and do not recognize their legal rights to seek asylum. US immigration policies and procedures implement this perspective towards asylum seekers within its borders and outside. Visiting the Brownsville Bus



Station, volunteers warned us that ICE delivers asylum seekers in ankle and handcuffs. While detained, asylum seekers do not have a change of clothes or adequate nutrition for days to weeks, and the agents take away their hair ties, shoelaces, and all personal belongings. This treatment only serves to strip asylum seekers of their dignity. Seeing and interacting with asylum seekers at the bus station, I saw just how unnecessarily cruel my country treats migrants.

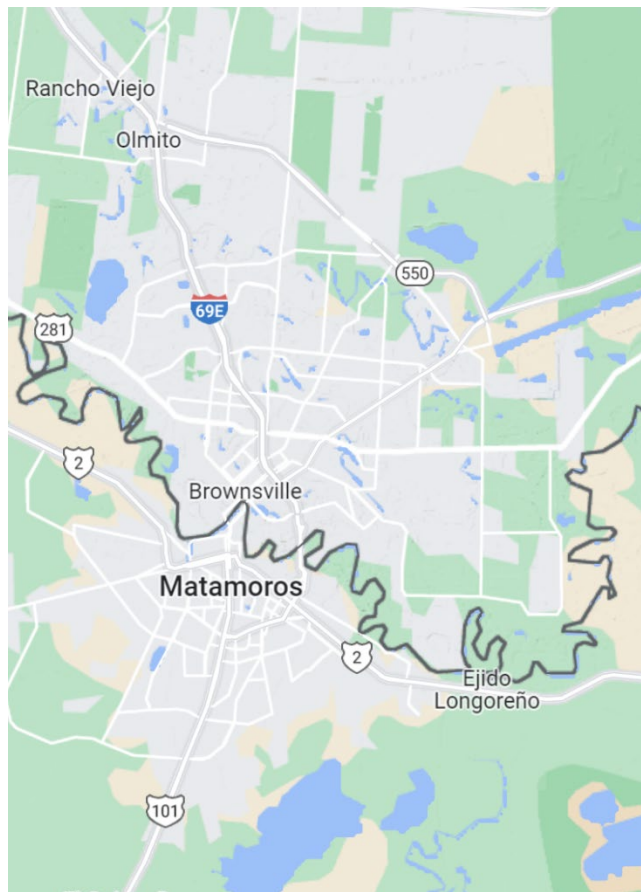


Figure 3. Map of Matamoros and Brownsville border. Source: Google Maps

In Matamoros, the conditions were much worse. The asylum seekers waiting indefinitely in shelters were wracked by anxiety and the dangers for migrants in the city that constantly loomed over them. Talking with them made it even clearer that these individuals were forcibly displaced and have nowhere to return. The people I met were

good people who had suffered horrible circumstances. Mariana, an asylum seeker told me that it was easy to listen to their stories, but it was difficult to live their lives. Confronting the reality of asylum seekers waiting in Matamoros drove me to do this research and communicate the urgent need for asylum reform that prioritizes humanitarian needs.

## **Data Collection**

This thesis drew on data from participant observations and interviews for analysis. The two sources of data integrated together illuminated the ways the US immigration policies like MPP and Title 42 impacted asylum-seekers in Matamoros. In the summer of 2021, I collected data with a team of researchers from the Latin American Mobility Project (LAMP), led by Dr. Sarah Blue and Dr. Jennifer Devine. As a team, we visited three shelters and volunteered with two organizations in Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Mexico over the course of 12 days. The field notes and interviews we conducted as a team come from the three trips the LAMP lab took to the US-Mexico border. My data also included secondary data from interviews collected by Dr. Blue and Dr. Devine in Fall of 2020 with 12 humanitarian aid workers, immigration lawyers, medical service providers, and other volunteers working at the border.

My first source of data included field notes from participant observations while volunteering with organizations that work with the asylum-seekers in Brownsville and Matamoros (Figure 3). For my fieldwork, I volunteered with Team Brownsville, Global Response Management (GRM), One Mission Ministries (OMM), Rainbow Bridge, and Casa del Migrante (See Table 1 for more details). The Team Brownsville site was located in the Brownsville Bus Station. There, my team and I worked with Team Brownsville

volunteers to pass out supplies to paroled asylees. Global Response Management is a clinic located in Matamoros where I helped administer COVID-19 tests and interpreted for health care workers. OMM, Rainbow Bridge and Casa del Migrante were all shelters for asylum seekers in Matamoros. There we organized activities for the women and children including making friendship bracelets, coloring books, and playing *loteria*. After doing volunteer work, I recorded field notes documenting my experiences and observations.

The first source of interview data was 12 interviews collected by Dr. Jennifer Devine and Dr. Sarah Blue in 2020. These interviewees were humanitarian volunteers who worked with the Matamoros asylum seekers. These interviewees were teachers, healthcare workers, engineers, lawyers, and other community members who organized together to provide survival resources to the asylum seekers in Matamoros. I did not collect these interviews, but I worked with the LAMP lab in 2020 to help transcribe and code them. By the time I traveled to the RGV for my fieldwork, the Matamoros camp had been fenced off. The humanitarian workers provided important information about the camp and the challenges that asylum seekers experienced there as the camp still existed when these interviews were collected.

My second source was the interviews with asylum seekers collected in Brownsville and Matamoros during the summer of 2021. At this point, many asylum seekers were living in shelters. My team and I used snowball sampling to recruit 45 asylum seekers for interview during fieldwork in Matamoros and Brownsville during the summer of 2021. The asylum seekers we interviewed fled from Mexico, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Haiti. I met all of the asylum seekers I interviewed through volunteering

at the shelters, clinic, or bus station. Asylum seekers were invited to participate in interviews after finishing activities we had prepared for them. Of the interviewees, one group was involved in service provision in Mexico, the second was recently paroled in the US, and the third was staying in shelters in Matamoros. I interviewed asylum seekers who are 18 or older and speak English or Spanish fluently.

Table 1. Details about fieldwork sites and number of interviewees from each site.

<b>Field Sites</b>	<b>Mission</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Affiliations</b>	<b>Number of interviewees</b>
<b>Global Response Management Clinic</b>	Perform routine COVID-19 tests for asylum seekers and provide some emergency health care	Matamoros, Mexico; near International Gateway Bridge	Global Response Management: International non-profit organization	7
<b>Brownsville Bus Station</b>	Provide resources to asylum seekers released from ICE detention for parole in the US	Brownsville, TX; near International Gateway Bridge	Team Brownsville: grassroots organization formed by local educators	6
<b>Casa del Migrante</b>	Provide temporary housing to migrants recently arrived in Matamoros	Matamoros, Mexico; distant from border in the city	The Catholic Church	13
<b>One Mission Ministries Shelter</b>	Baptist church aimed to help local youth that became a shelter for asylum seekers	Matamoros, Mexico; distant from border in the city	One Mission Ministries	11
<b>Rainbow Bridge</b>	Shelter started by gay asylum seeker to serve LGBTQ asylum seekers	Matamoros, Mexico; distant from border in the city	LGBTQ community	9

## **Data Analysis**

This thesis relied on qualitative methods of analysis. These methods drew on empirical data to understand the social implications of policies of expulsion. I analyzed the field notes and interviews using open coding methods to analyze common themes answering my research questions. I analyzed the field notes and interviews using open coding methods (Cope, 2016) to uncover common themes answering my research questions. Throughout this process I developed and analyzed themes based on analytic and descriptive codes.

The interviews were guided by an open-ended survey divided into four categories of questions: 1) demographic questions, 2) questions about their migration journeys, 3) questions about drivers of migration, 4) and questions about access to survival resources at the border. The purpose of the guided survey was to provide consistency across interviews rather than to collect responses for statistical analysis. To code my interview data, I organized the observations and interviews into themes along the question categories. I developed a codebook for each data source to organize the data and analyze patterns. As a starting point, I used analytic codes based on my interview questions to search information related to my research questions (Cope, 2016). These codes included factors determining migration decisions, violence experienced during the migration journey, survival at the border, grassroots advocacy, and barriers to asylum. I started with these initial codes and then adjusted as I analyzed the data. Further descriptive coding, themes emerging from the data (Cope, 2016), informed my understanding of migrants' situations pertinent to my research. Together, these codes aided my analysis of the themes, which I elaborate in Chapters V and VI.

To supplement the primarily qualitative data, I included some descriptive statistics using data from Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) site. This data covers the asylum outcomes for MPP asylum seekers. I review the MPP outcomes by percentage and the demographics of the MPP asylum seekers assigned to the Brownsville court. This additional information is important for understanding the way that MPP so severely limited access to asylum for asylum seekers coming to the US-Mexico border.

For this research, I traveled to Matamoros, Tamaulipas (Mexico) and Brownsville, Texas for a total of 12 days and to five sites working with different organizations for each. The sites included the Brownsville bus station, the GRM clinic in Matamoros, two religious-based shelters, and one shelter for LGBTQ asylum seekers. With the LAMP lab, I collected 45 interviews with asylum seekers from Mexico, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Haiti. I also provide a brief analysis of the MPP outcomes for asylum seekers assigned to the Brownsville court using TRAC data. I analyzed the data using coding methods.

## **V. CREATION OF A HUMANITARIAN CRISIS**

Over the course of decades, under different US presidencies, immigration policies of deterrence were implemented with the implicit aim of making the US-Mexico border too dangerous for migrants to travel across it (Slack & Martinez, 2020). Throughout this process, migration through Mexico became an increasingly risky journey for all migrants, including asylum seekers and other refugees who have been forcibly displaced from their homes. Rather than meet asylum seekers with humanitarian care, the US designed policies to increase the hardships of migration. Migrants traveling through Mexico to the US southern border have faced extreme circumstances in both the terrain and with the drug-trafficking organizations they encounter during their migration. The humanitarian crisis that asylum seekers are experienced in Mexico due to MPP was a product of the US's political effort to exclude immigrants.

This chapter contains two main sections. The first discusses how US policies and practices of expulsion, which include metering, MPP, and Title 42, have shaped a humanitarian crisis for asylum seekers. These actions eliminated opportunities to access asylum, extended the waiting period of the asylum process, and forced asylum seekers to endure the lengthy process of waiting for their asylum hearing in dangerous locations outside of the US. This process mimicked the strategies of other wealthy states around the world attempting to end asylum as a legitimate pathway of immigration (Mountz, 2020). Relying on interviews with asylum seekers in Brownsville and Matamoros and local advocates working with asylum seekers in addition to quantitative data from Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC), this chapter

describes how the US has imposed cruel policies on some of the most vulnerable individuals, particularly targeting Latino asylum seekers.

The second half of the chapter discusses how these policies have manifested locally in Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Tamaulipas (Mexico). The Matamoros refugee camp that formed in response to MPP revealed the devastating impacts of these US asylum policies. The asylum seekers in the camp experienced severe hardship that was somewhat alleviated by the kindness of volunteers from Brownsville and non-profit organizations in Matamoros. They encountered three main challenges that all compounded one another to illuminate how asylum policies of exclusion impact migrants at the southern border. First, I show how asylum seekers and volunteers had to actively resist the Mexican government to maintain autonomy and control over the camp. Second, I detail how residents of the MPP camp faced numerous environmental threats including flooding, a hurricane, and wildlife. Third, the asylum seekers were constant targets of violence from drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs) and struggled to stay safe in the space of the camp.

This chapter responds to the first research question: How did the implementation of MPP and Title 42 impacted asylum-seekers at the U.S.-Mexico border? In response, I contend that US immigration policies initiated under the Trump Administration have shaped a humanitarian crisis for asylum seekers arriving at the US-Mexico border. This crisis is most visible in the Matamoros migrant camp which was the physical product of these exclusionary policies.



## **US Policies Create Crisis for Asylum Seekers**

### ***Locals Observe Policy Impacts***

Many in community of advocates living along the border recognized a decades-long pattern of immigration policies aimed at deterrence. Matamoros resident and volunteer with Team Brownsville Jeff Stone emphasized, “what's going on with the asylum seekers really is an extension of what's been going on forever.” He traced many of the changes of the border back to 1996, coinciding with the implementation of the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA). AEDPA expanded the crimes classified as “aggravated felonies” that would be grounds for deportation of undocumented immigrants and also established “expedited removal” procedures for apprehended migrants. IIRIRA built on AEDPA and eroded immigrants’ rights to due process in immigration proceedings, expanded border enforcement, and increased the use of mandatory detention. These policies further criminalized immigration and increased the hardships of migration.

Amanda Gomez, a grassroots leader and former resident of the Rio Grande Valley, also recalled noticing changes at the border coinciding with immigration policies. She reflected on changes that had occurred from the Bush to Obama Administration but underscored the severity of the changes since Trump was elected. Many of the lawyers interviewed specified 2014 as a particularly difficult year for them working in immigration law with a large number of unaccompanied minors arriving at the border, increasing 132% in the Rio Grande sector from the previous year (US Customs & Border Protection [CBP], 2015). That same year, the US implemented metering for the first time

to limit the number of Haitians who could seek asylum at ports of entry along the US-Mexico border. Attorney Susan Silva explained that though metering was no longer used after 2015, it “came back in full force right after Trump got elected.” Through their observations and experiences living along the border, many of the interviewees learned that for decades, US immigration policies have aimed to deter and criminalize migration.

However, many of the humanitarian workers interviewed described the ways that Trump policies not only attacked immigration but also dismantled asylum in the process. Immigration lawyer Mary Jones described 2018 as the “worst time in [her] life as a lawyer.” In 2018, with the formalization of family separation through “Zero Tolerance” and the first widespread use of metering at ports of entry, these procedures created chaos and unnecessary suffering for asylum seekers. Jones explained the courts and ICE were so disorganized in maintaining records of immigrant families throughout Zero Tolerance to the degree that she was personally keeping records of families in the courts because the US agencies in charge were not. As the immigrant advocates contend, Trump’s attack on immigration draws from past policies and procedures deterring migration but implemented them with greater intensity.

Metering and MPP produced a humanitarian crisis at the US-Mexico border leaving thousands of asylum seekers homeless. Starting with metering, many asylum seekers were displaced and turned away at the border when attempting to seek asylum. Metering was a process that CBP used to limit the number of people who could seek asylum each day at a port of entry. Though this process varied widely across the border, in most cases Mexican immigration officials, shelters, or as in the case of Matamoros, the asylum seekers would manage the metering list themselves (American Immigration

Council, 2020). CBP did not control the list but rather would contact the individual or organization in Mexico that was in charge of the list to determine who would cross the border each day. Along the border, the list was managed by various actors ranging in formality. In Matamoros, the asylum seekers in the camp managed the list themselves (American Immigration Council 2020). While the US government publicly stated for asylum seekers to go to ports of entry, it also implemented “Remain in Mexico” (MPP) that forced asylum seekers to wait in limbo in Mexico.

Attorney Alison Anderson described metering as a crisis created by CBP itself as it was a result of CBP filling up detention centers and making it increasingly more difficult for asylum seekers to get parole and thus released from detention while awaiting their asylum hearing. Anderson explained the result of metering was that the US forced, “whole families with little babies [to] wait on the bridges. Right, it's 90 degrees outside, and the south Texas-northern Mexico border and they're waiting there for two months to come into the United States.” Through the process of metering, CBP was turning away migrants in vulnerable situations, in urgent need of protection. Lawyer and activist Laura Hubert recalled hearing and “verifying that people were coming across the bridge, um, with bullet wounds in their bodies, etc, etc, very clearly in need of asylum. And every single one of them was being told no.” This practice occurred at various ports of entry along the border and was normalized under MPP, which required asylum seekers to wait indefinitely in Mexico while seeking asylum in the US.

### *Racism Embedded in MPP*

As the numbers of asylum seekers waiting at the bridges in Matamoros grew from metering at the border, the US responded with an even more severe policy to further block access to asylum. With the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), referred to as “Remain in Mexico,” the US formalized and extended metering by forcing all asylum seekers to wait in Mexico while pursuing asylum cases in the US. Metering, followed by MPP, left thousands of asylum seekers homeless all along the border in dangerous cities whereas normally, they would be detained and could possibly be paroled to stay with a family member or sponsor in the US. Initiated under the Obama Administration, the Family Case Management Program was a cost-effective and humane program enabling some asylum seekers to be released into the US to pursue their cases after passing a credible fear review and consultation with a case worker on their rights and responsibilities (Timm, 2018). Though the program was met with high compliance from asylum seekers and treated them with dignity, it was replaced with Zero Tolerance by the Trump Administration, which detained and separated families (Timm, 2018). From Zero Tolerance onward, the Trump Administration implemented procedures and policies that excluded asylum seekers from entry into the US. MPP manifested as extreme expulsion to asylum seekers presenting themselves at ports of entry along the US-Mexico border.

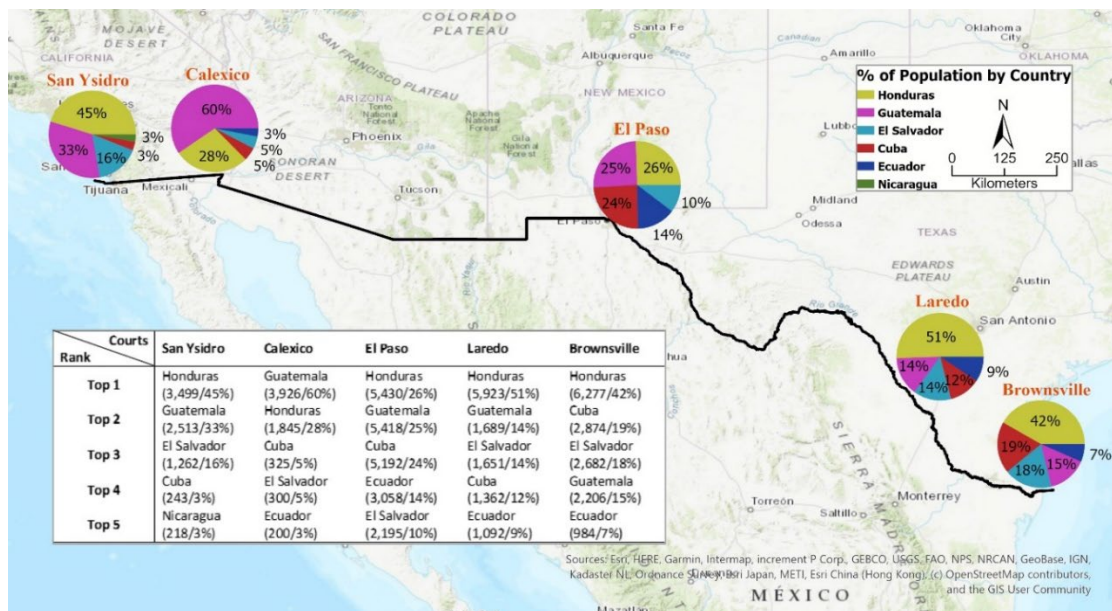


Figure 4. MPP court cases by top five nationalities along US-Mexico border. Data are through September 2020. Map credit: Mei Yang, Latin American Mobility Project. Data source: Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (2020).

Because of the regional scope of MPP, Latino asylum seekers, especially those from Central America, were the main population affected. Figure 4. illustrates the country of origin of the MPP asylum seekers registered at each MPP court along the border. The majority of MPP asylum seekers are from Honduras, Guatemala, Cuba, El Salvador, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. Miguel Contreras, a founder and leader of Team Brownsville highlighted the racialization and criminalization of immigration that Trump amplified during his presidency. Miguel observed:

The whole dismantling of the asylum process, since Trump took over the administration has, since the very beginning, started with a ban of the Muslim travel, it's been an attack completely on the immigration process, and trying to completely dismantle people from coming into this country. It appears to be based on racism because it's always about dark skinned people. Because if people were coming in from Europe, I don't think he'd have a problem with it.

To those working and volunteering side-by-side with asylum seekers, it is obvious that metering and MPP are attacks on asylum rooted in racism. Immigration lawyers also

underscored the damage that has been done to asylum since Trump was president. Silva especially emphasized “Zero Tolerance” as a shift from criminalizing undocumented immigration to also targeting asylum seeking. She too believed this attack on asylum to be rooted in xenophobia and racism.

In Brownsville, the majority of asylum seekers came from Honduras (6,277/42%), Cuba (2,874/19%), El Salvador (2,682/18%), Guatemala (2,206/15%), and Ecuador (984/7%) (Figure 4.). This data reflected the nationalities of asylum seekers enrolled in the MPP court in Brownsville from the beginning of MPP up until September 2020, capturing the peak of the Matamoros camp population. Miguel, a Team Brownsville volunteer who regularly worked in the Matamoros camp, estimated that about 90% of the camp was comprised of Central American asylum seekers. However, as can be seen in Figure 5., asylum seekers also migrated from countries in South America and the Caribbean. Volunteers and asylum seekers explain that there were a small number of Black asylum seekers from Haiti and a few African countries including Congo, Eritrea, Senegal. The majority of these populations were in shelters in the city grouped with each other where they spoke common languages other than Spanish. Mateo, an asylum seeker who had lived in the camp, explained that the majority of those in the camp spoke Spanish or at least enough Spanish to communicate with each other due to waiting in Mexico for such a long time.

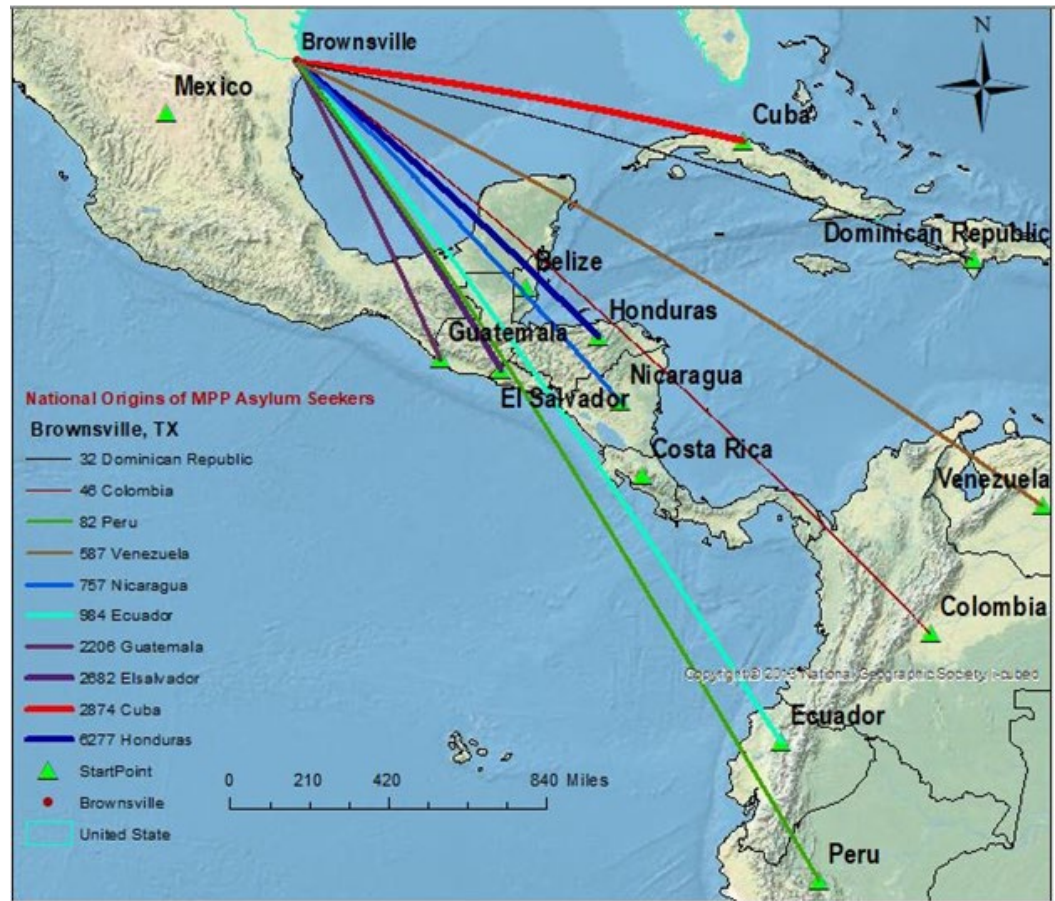


Figure 5. Top five nationalities of asylum seekers assigned to Brownsville MPP court. Map credit: Xiu Wu, Latin American Mobility Project. Data source: Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (2020).

In the Matamoros camp, asylum seekers organized themselves into groups by their nationalities. Within these groups, they established a system of governance within the camp to resolve any conflicts, share resources, and protect one another. Volunteers and asylum seekers explained how groups of asylum seekers came together and elected leaders for themselves to help stay organized in the camp. According to Mateo, though they generally organized themselves based on nationality, all of the asylum seekers mixed together and shared solidarity with one another.

### MPP Outcomes

Of the total 71,076 asylum seekers registered in MPP, the majority were assigned to immigration courts along the Texas-Mexico border (TRAC, 2021). While the El Paso port of entry received the greatest number of asylum seekers overall, the MPP court at the Brownsville International Gateway Bridge determined the outcomes of the second largest population of 16,519 asylum seekers, or 23% of all asylum seekers enrolled in MPP up until September 2020. Figure 6 indicates the proportion of MPP asylum seekers assigned to the Brownsville MPP court in comparison to the overall population.

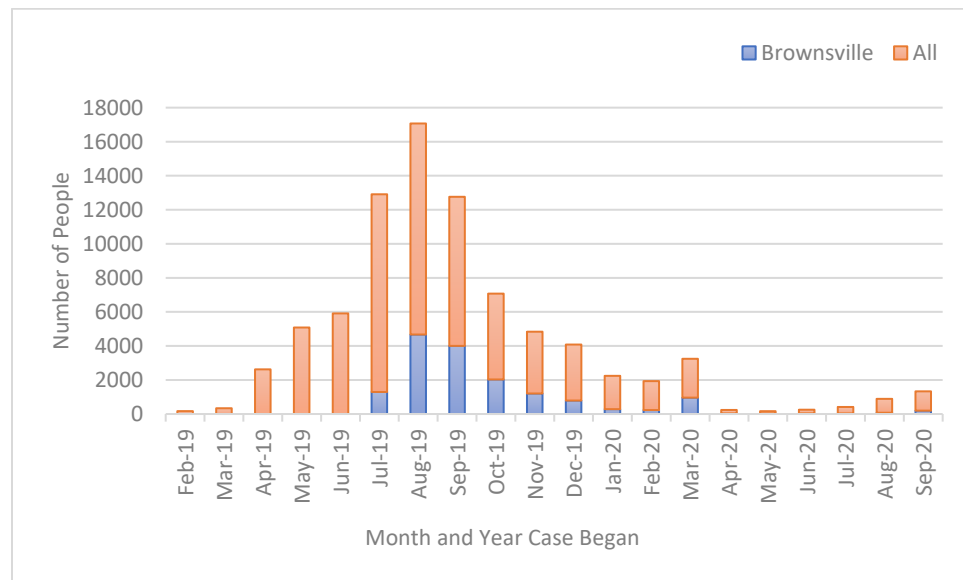


Figure 6. Total number of MPP asylum seekers compared to number of asylum seekers assigned to Brownsville MPP court. Credit: Mei Yang, Latin American Mobility Project. Data source: Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (2020).

For MPP asylum seekers, there are five potential outcomes of their MPP case: removal order, voluntary departure, termination of proceedings, and relief granted. Court decisions ending with a removal order or voluntary departure require asylum seekers to return to their home countries or Mexico. Both outcomes result in the deportation or expulsion of the asylum seeker, but the two are distinct in that voluntary departure allows



them the opportunity to legally return to the US and a removal order does not. If a judge chooses to terminate proceedings, that means the asylum seeker will not be removed from the country, and their case is terminated. Similarly, an outcome of ‘relief granted’ indicates while the asylum seeker did not meet the criteria to terminate removal proceedings, the judge found other criteria that they meet to avoid removal and stay in the US. Finally, the case could end with an administrative or other closure when the judge chooses not to deport the asylum seekers based on “unspecified reasons or due to the government’s failure to prosecute the case” (TRAC, n.d., a).

Of the MPP asylum seekers in Matamoros, 6,202 (37% of total cases) had pending cases as of November 2021 (TRAC, n.d., b). Of the 10,317 closed cases, the vast majority ended with deportation or expulsion of the asylum seekers: 90.6% ended with a removal order and 0.03% in voluntary departure. Only 4.3% cases ended by terminating proceedings, 1.8% with relief, and 3.3% with and administrative or other closure, which all allow these asylum seekers to safely be released in the US.

Based on numbers alone, it is clear that the MPP system is designed to deter asylum seekers and has in fact turned thousands away at the border. MPP created physically barriers through the border severely restricting asylum seekers’ access to lawyers, which are essential for them to successfully make a case. The human consequences of extreme exclusion of asylum seekers, formalized through metering and MPP, manifested in the border cities of Mexico. By restricting access to asylum, the US created crisis for asylum seekers stranded in Mexico. MPP by design prolongs asylum seekers’ stay in Mexican border cities only to deny them asylum and permanently block their legal entry to the US in most cases. As a result of this MPP system, thousands of

asylum seekers waited indefinitely for years in a variety of precarious situations. The Matamoros asylum seeker camp that formed in response to MPP provides insight into the impacts of the US's exclusionary asylum policies. The story of the Matamoros MPP camp and the experiences of the asylum seekers who lived there convey the injustice of the asylum system in the US today.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US implemented Title 42, which completely halted the asylum process. Title 42 has also generally applied to all migrants arriving at the border and has resulted in CBP turning back hundreds of thousands of migrants arriving at ports of entry. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the tent courts to process MPP cases were closed indefinitely. When Biden became president, he allowed for non-profit organizations and lawyers to file Title 42 exemptions for particularly vulnerable groups like the LGBTQ asylum seekers or for individuals with medical emergencies. However, Title 42 remains in place as of the writing of this thesis weaponizing the COVID-19 pandemic to turn away the vast majority of migrants who are also incredibly vulnerable. Despite ample evidence indicating that migrants pose no greater risk of spreading the virus than any of the millions of people who cross the border every day, Title 42 remains in place.

### **The Matamoros MPP Camp**

US immigration policies and practices exacerbated a humanitarian crisis for asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border. However, rather than respond by assisting asylum seekers displaced in Mexican border cities, both the US and Mexico abandoned this population and further limited their access to asylum in the US. In the absence of

state action, ordinary community members in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas and in Matamoros organized to support the asylum seekers who were waiting at the opposite end of the bridge to seek asylum.

Humanitarian workers interviewed explained how asylum seekers began to group on the bridges from Matamoros to Brownsville. As greater use of metering increased the number of people waiting, and the time that asylum seekers would have to wait in Mexico lengthened. The lists informally run by the asylum seekers, were getting longer and longer. More people were waiting for their chance to seek asylum. With the implementation of MPP, the situation became even more severe because nearly all Latino asylum seekers who crossed the border to the US would be enrolled in the program and then quickly returned to Mexico. In interviews with CBP officers or Border Patrol agents, asylum seekers would have to affirmatively prove that they would “more than likely not” be harmed while in Mexico to speak with an asylum officer regarding their claim. However, the CBP officers and Border Patrol agents were not permitted to directly ask the asylum seekers if they had a credible fear of returning to Mexico. In the past, asylum seekers had to prove a credible fear of returning to their home countries, which explains why they would not expect a requirement to explain a fear of returning to Mexico (American Immigration Council, 2022a). Only if an asylum petitioner clarified fear of returning to Mexico, could speak with an asylum officer. Even then, they would not have access to a lawyer during the interview (American Immigration Council, 2022a). The MPP process was intentionally confusing to allow the US to send as many asylum seekers back to Mexico as possible.

With the collaboration of local volunteers and the asylum seekers themselves, a grassroots refugee governance system developed to care for the asylum seekers. This movement was a reaction to the US failing to provide any basic resources or legal services while asylum seekers waited in Mexico under MPP. While not the case in all border cities, in Matamoros, the asylum seekers began forming a camp in the city's plaza in early 2019 (Figure 7). With the beginning of MPP in late 2018, many of the active volunteers in the Brownsville/Matamoros area responded to the needs of asylum seekers in Matamoros. Lawyer and volunteer Mary Jones explained how after MPP was implemented, the camp population exponentially. Angry Tías member Laura Hubert also noted the growing population as a result of MPP. "[The camp] went up from maybe 200 to 500 people to about 2000, almost overnight with MPP. And then everybody jumped in and got involved." The emergence of the camp in Matamoros drew people from Brownsville to help the asylum seekers. In the camp, outside volunteers helped the asylum seekers by providing them survival resources (food, water, shelter), medical care, legal services, and in some cases assisted with camp management.



Figure 7. Tent camp in the Matamoros Plaza. Credit: Mandy Truman

Many of the volunteers explained how from the beginning of the camp in early 2019, the asylum seekers had a strong sense of solidarity. Sister Dolores said, “the families pretty much themselves were on their own, you know, and so they knew that and had been on their own, they started to develop a sense of community among themselves, a way of protecting themselves and helping each other out.” From the beginning with metering, the asylum seekers relied on one another in their situation. Asylum seekers ran the list that dictated who would be allowed to seek asylum each day with the process of metering. With MPP, they stayed together and formed a strong community and established a system of governance to protect one another and provide for their essential needs. Camp maintenance volunteer Robert Smith explained from working closely with the asylum seekers in the camp that they had realized they needed “a collective voice and

common information.” In response to this need, the asylum seekers over time developed organization within the camp and elected leaders to represent themselves.

Along with the leaders, the asylum seekers also chose four leaders to operate ‘free stores’ in the camp. In this system, Team Brownsville would collect supplies, bring them across the border, and allocate the supplies to the stores. The store managers chosen by the asylum seekers would each serve a certain number of people in the camp. Under this system, the asylum seekers could go to their assigned free store to get whatever supplies they may need. Miguel of Team Brownsville explained the asylum seekers used colored bracelets, so everyone knew which store to go to. While Team Brownsville provided the supplies from the US, it was the asylum seekers who carried the important role of allocating resources fairly. The free store system gave power to the store managers and created a situation where the asylum seekers would need to rely on one another to survive in the camp. Additionally, this system uplifted the dignity of all the camp asylum seekers. Rather than volunteers giving everyone identical packs of supplies once a week for example, the volunteers and asylum seekers coordinated together, so everyone received the specific supplies they needed. The free store system solved a logistical problem for volunteers but also fostered community ties. As Miguel explains further, it would have been impossible for Team Brownsville to keep track of 1800 people themselves, but the store managers were able to track the 300 people assigned to them. Further, the managers filled an important leadership role in the community and got to know the families assigned to them and vice versa.

Group division in the camp typically ran along lines of nationality, however, as Mateo, an asylum seeker, explained, the asylum seekers in the camp did not segregate

themselves necessarily and were mixed up throughout the camp. While national ties were strong with a large number of people coming from the same few countries in Central America, they all had a strong solidarity for one another. In contrast to the racism in the asylum system, the vast majority of asylum seekers in the camp regarded each other as equals in the same difficult battle for asylum. Mateo insisted, “Here there is no difference. Here we are all equal. We are all treated the same. By each other, the organizations, by everyone. No one can say there is racism here.” While Cubans and Haitians and Guatemalans all face different circumstances once in the US seeking asylum, the common experience of the camp put everyone in the same standing with one another.

The asylum seekers’ unity was a strong asset to them while living in the camp. In a survival situation under intense stress and with limited access to resources, it is easy to imagine disaster and chaos emerging. Mateo explained, “We all helped each other among ourselves... sometimes there was nothing we could do because all of us were afraid.” The traumas that drove their migration compounded with the traumas of living in the camp created very difficult circumstances to navigate. However, as Mateo continued to explain, their governance system was effective. Any conflict was peacefully resolved through discussion among the leaders.

Communication in the camp was important, and WhatsApp was a powerful tool for the asylum seekers and their advocates in the US. With the use of group messaging, the asylum seekers were able to quickly address problems when they arose. Later, for their nighttime security watch, advocates gave the asylum seekers radios. Mateo explained that the Mexican police provided no security to the camp, so the asylum

seekers had to manage this important task on their own for the most part. With the onset of the pandemic though, Mexican officials fenced off the camp to help better contain any spread of COVID-19 that may have occurred there. The asylum seekers have many reasons to question who they trust in Mexico. All migrants in Mexico have a target on their backs from the cartels, the police, and the general public. The asylum seekers' trust in one another is key, and the camp space facilitated that trust in one another.

While the Matamoros camp was unofficial, it was not informal. The asylum seekers developed a democratic system of governance to help distribute resources within the camp and to provide security and other support to one another. As a result, the asylum seekers had greater autonomy in the camp than in a traditional refugee camp. In many ways it was a problem that Mexico never invited the UNHCR to construct a camp for the asylum seekers. The US has treated asylum seekers with the utmost negligence, and this mistreatment has been repeated by Mexico. Without resources from these powerful states or the UN, the asylum seekers were left in a very difficult situation. However, their leadership in their situation aids in reimagining the power dynamics of a refugee camp. The Matamoros camp involved the support of a community of volunteers and formed relationships between the asylum seekers and the locals. The grassroots refugee governance that emerged with the formation of the camp underscores the significance of placing power in the hands of the asylum seekers themselves, contrasting typical refugee camps.



## **Hardship in the Camp**

### *Fight for Autonomy in Mexico*

The Mexican government's response to the asylum seekers in Matamoros supported the US's exclusive policies. The camp in Matamoros that formed in response to Trump's MPP policy had a large population and was located in a prominent location in the city's plaza until it was later moved closer to the river. The visibility of this first location and the large number of people made the asylum seekers impossible to ignore. Their strength in number gave them leverage to resist movement and maintain autonomy. Many of the interviewees explained how the city of Matamoros and Mexican officials did not want the asylum seekers to stay in the city's plaza. Grace Little, the director of the camp's medical clinic stated:

they [Mexico] want them [the asylum seekers] to leave in whatever means possible. If they all died tomorrow, they would be totally okay with that. They have no interest in providing resources and they do not want to provide, they do not want to allow the groups to provide any resources that would quote, 'make them comfortable.'

Not only the US, but also Mexico treated asylum seekers with disdain and declined to provide protection for them. The asylum seekers in the camp faced resistance to their occupation of the camp space.

An important aspect of the asylum seekers' camp was the ability to leverage their population to gain greater autonomy. A camp volunteer explained that there was "power in numbers" saying "you can't just ... forcibly move 1000 people ... it comes with some benefits of being able to remain autonomous, being able to continue to live right next to the border and put pressure on how broken the system is, right?" This interviewee highlighted the importance of the asylum seekers' numbers as an asset to their resistance.

Their ability to work together allowed them to enact greater agency over their movement. When Mexico's National Institute of Migration (INM) wanted to move the asylum seekers, volunteers say the asylum seekers "didn't want to feel like they were in a formal camp that was regulated and that their mobility was, was limited in any way." Although the INM was successful in moving the asylum seekers from the plaza to the riverside, once establishing the camp in that location, they resisted any other movement even in the face of Hurricane Hannah. This moment was a significant expression of their agency despite their marginalization.

These descriptions from the interviewees clearly demonstrated the marginalization that asylum seekers faced in Mexico and the way that they were seen as outsiders by the government and neighboring residents of the city. Because of the resistance from the city and federal government, the collaboration with volunteer groups and among the asylum seekers was essential for them to maintain their autonomy.

### *Environmental Conditions*

Asylum seekers in the Matamoros camp faced not only political challenges to their occupation of space in the city. The open space of the camp, especially with its proximity to the Rio Grande, was located in the natural habitats of snakes, rodents, and insects. There were many interviewees who mentioned infestations as a problem in the camp. According to Miguel, Team Brownsville volunteer, it only makes sense. With the additional problem of rains and the subsequent flooding, the camp had to coexist with the creatures living in the surrounding area:

It's wilderness what you see there. And so it's natural that there's rats living there, there's snakes. That's where the animals live. Because the water came up, of course,

the animals are trying to survive as well as our asylum seekers. And so, there was rats and snakes that actually came into where the tents are.

With the water and the heat, mosquitoes also found a home in the camp. In this case, Team Brownsville received donations of mosquito repellent to distribute in the camp and also had exterminators come to spray the camp. While these tools may have helped in the short term, the asylum seekers regularly had to deal with the challenges of living in nature, the animals' home. This human-nature confrontation further proves the inhumanity of forcing asylum seekers to wait in Mexico, indefinitely and especially without shelter.

Beyond learning to live with the animal life in the camp, asylum seekers faced even more serious confrontations with the weather. Mateo, an asylum seeker, described the weather conditions as one of the biggest challenges to living in the camp. While the heat, humidity, and cold during the winter months all posed problems, it was the rains that he elaborated the most. Mateo explained, "the rain was very strong. The tents would tear, and trees or branches would fall. It was very dangerous when there were heavy rains." It is critical to understand the asylum seekers had only their camping tents to protect them from the weather.

The height of extreme weather occurred when Hurricane Hanna landed in Matamoros. Service providers explained Hurricane Hanna was especially challenging because of the limited contact they had with the asylum seekers due to COVID-19. At that time, the volunteers were working remotely as much as possible and very few were physically going into the camp. However, with Hurricane Hanna heading towards Matamoros, volunteers stepped forward to help asylum seekers monitor the Rio Grande's water levels. Camp volunteer Robert described staying the night in the camp to determine

if the flood risks would require them to relocate the camp. He explained, “We didn't really have a choice, monitoring the river. We were here. [We] stayed overnight... And we kept eyes on the water and the rest of it. And the leaders worked with us with that doing visual checks and taking shifts watching the river rise.” Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) team of engineers described the consequences of the Hurricane. Any heavy rain in the camp ruined everyone's tent shelters and belongings. Everything the asylum seekers and volunteers had created in the camp could quickly be lost.

Additionally, volunteers explained the challenges in communicating with the Mexican government in the midst of this natural disaster. Miscommunications regarding the safety of the camp's location led volunteers to believe the camp should be evacuated. The city of Matamoros suggested the floodplain where the camp was located would be flooded to spare the city. However, the asylum seekers refused to relocate. Lila Henson, a WASH engineer described the asylum seekers' response to evacuation, “the people don't want to leave their community, they're right there. They're at the border, they can look across, it's relatively safe, comparatively, compared to other parts of Matamoros. They just didn't want to leave essentially.” The camp's location near the river was a double-edged sword in this case. While its proximity to the border facilitated visibility of the impacts of MPP as they manifested in the camp, it was a dangerous location due to the river flooding. However, based on my fieldwork in Matamoros, any rain could cause flooding. Even after just a brief rain while we were visiting shelters, the streets were flooded (Figure 8.). Ultimately, in the case of Hurricane Hanna, the asylum seekers accepted the risk of flooding over relocating the camp. For the asylum seekers living in

the camp, the visibility and the autonomy the camp's location afforded them outweighed the environmental risks.

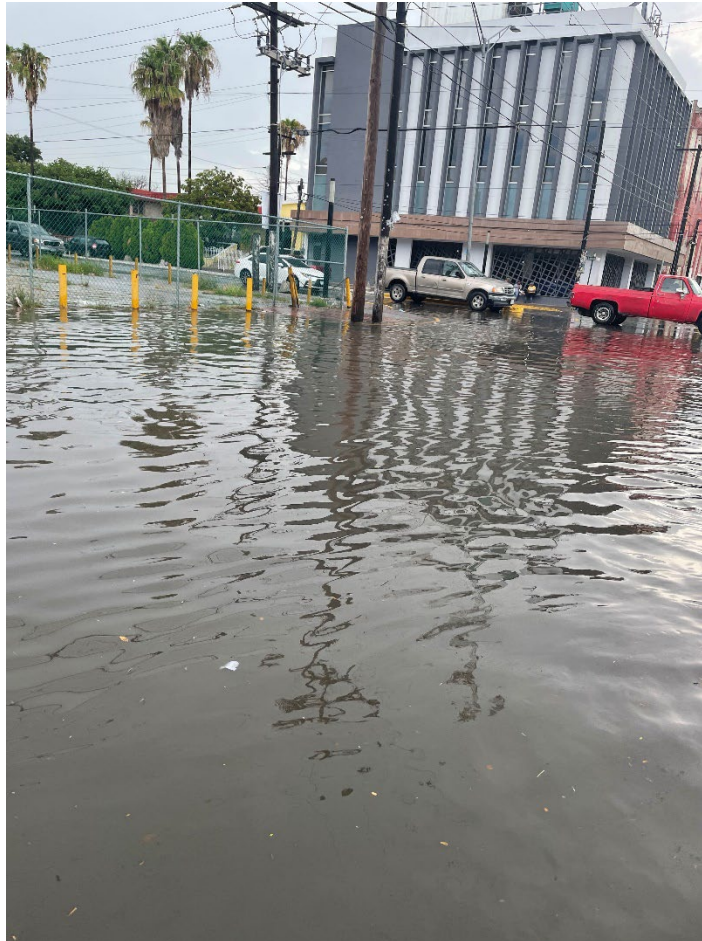


Figure 8. Flooding in Matamoros streets from brief rainfall. Credit: Elise Arellano-Thompson

Beyond causing the asylum seekers physical danger and discomfort, Hurricane Hanna forced the asylum seekers to come together and challenge the authorities dictating their daily lives. After Mexican officials moved the asylum seekers' camp from the city plaza to the park by the river, located in the floodplain on the other side of the levee, the asylum seekers feared the government would move them again and not allow them to return. Volunteers explained that the asylum seekers refused to move unless "they saw the river rise." In response to pressure from not only the Mexican government officials,

but also from volunteers concerned for their safety, the asylum seekers resisted movement of the camp. They leveraged their large population to remain immobile. While there were significant environmental risks that the asylum seekers experienced with their camp located near the river, they also saw value in the visibility and autonomy they gained through their location and population.

### *Risk of Violence in Matamoros*

In Mexican border cities, Matamoros included, drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs) dominate the area. The border cities of Mexico are known to be very dangerous to migrants in particular. The risk of cartel violence is enhanced for them due to their transience and lack of community as they are traveling (Slack, 2019). The cartels regularly target migrants traversing through Mexico. Along the border, the DTOs have had great deal of control over who crosses the border. Many interviewees explained that many migrants were reported to have drowned in the river. However, they further clarified that many times it was because these migrants attempted to cross the border without first paying the cartels, so the cartels shoot them to kill them as they swim across. Organization leader, Laura described this dynamic that has been exacerbated by US policies restricting migrants' and asylum seekers' access to the border. She explained:

But, if you cross by the river, down here, in this part of Texas, you will be shot by the gangs unless you pay a very hefty crossing fee like \$1,000 or more, because they own the riverside now that's where they cross their product. People were crossing and getting shot, people were trying to cross and drowning, drownings happen all the time. Even though it looks like a big puddle of water certain times of years, it's really hard to understand how people drown, but they do. Right now, with this, 'Remain in Mexico' program, bodies are floating down the river in Matamoros.

With hundreds of asylum seekers gathered together in an open space, the Matamoros camp was a perfect target for DTOs, described as “their honeypot” by Grace. One lawyer, Susan discussed the reality of living in the camp: “the expectation of violence and the expectation of kidnapping.” Sister Dolores explained that the camp residents had an awareness of the dangers in the city and for that reason wanted the camp located close to the International Gateway Bridge hoping that the visibility of this spot would help provide them security. While the camp location provided some benefits to the asylum seekers, without any security or closure, it could not protect them from the violence in Matamoros. These dangers that asylum seekers faced are evidence of MPP’s failure. With ample evidence of the violence that migrants experience in Mexico’s border cities, the US implemented policies that required asylum seekers to wait in these cities indefinitely.

The asylum seekers and service providers witnessed the cruelty of the DTOs in Matamoros. One of the asylum seekers who lived in the camp described some of the violence he witnessed saying, “we saw them [coyotes/cartels] come to the camp and throw people in the river, beat them up, beat them with clubs. All of this was very bad, very traumatic.” He explained further that many people were killed by the DTOs while in the camp. Similarly, lawyer Susan reported that women had been raped and the LGBTQ asylum seekers had been beat up in the camp. The lack of security was a serious problem in the camp because as Susan states, “how are they going to protect themselves in a dome tent? Right? All it is, is just zip it open.” Living in the camp came with the expectation of experiencing violence at the hands of DTOs. The asylum seekers in Matamoros were

forced to live with this reality and witness or experience violence without any meaningful protection.

One of the factors that exacerbated the danger in the camp was the corruption in Mexico. If asked whether they could go to the police to report crimes, asylum seekers responded “no” because the police and the cartels are “the same.” There is no one for them to turn to. In response to this question, Mateo, an asylum seeker said:

Truthfully no, there is a lot of corruption here in the police. Everyone is the same here. The police and the cartels work together. The cartels work together with the police. It is not a safe place to live.... Bad things happen here. If something bad happens to you, well nothing can be done, it is going to happen.

He explained that these conditions left everyone “defenseless” and feeling “helpless.” In the camp the asylum seekers only had themselves to rely on once the volunteers from Brownsville went home at the end of the day. Reflecting on the challenges of living in the camp, Mateo said, “we fought to survive.” Without any protection and facing a desperate situation with MPP, some asylum seekers attempted to cross the Rio Grande. However, there were many reports of drownings. Asylum seekers were faced with impossible choices in the Matamoros camp. Attempting to cross would likely end in either drowning or the cartels shooting them. Staying meant exposure to violence and risk of becoming a victim at any time. These conditions are horrific, and with MPP and Title 42 still in place, the risk of danger remains for asylum seekers in Matamoros.

After current President Biden initially terminated MPP, international organizations including the UNHCR and IOM were invited to help with the humanitarian crisis at the border created by Trump’s asylum policies. After President Biden first allowed for the MPP migrants in the camp to cross in February and March of 2021, the camp became an empty space. Once everyone had been crossed to the US with the help



of international organizations, the city of Matamoros surrounded the park with a barbed wire fence to prevent another camp from developing there (Figure 9). Even after the camp in Matamoros was emptied and fenced off from the public, asylum seekers have continued to arrive to border. These asylum seekers would be directed to shelters throughout the interior of Matamoros where they could find temporary care.



Figure 9. Former camp site surrounded by barbed-wire fence. Credit: Kathryn McDaniel

The camp's position in the park allowed for high visibility of the asylum seekers, but now in contrast, new arrivals are fragmented across the city in various shelters. While the conditions in the shelters are improved to those in the camp, asylum seekers now disappear into the city. Unlike the asylum seekers in the camp, those now living in shelters lack power in numbers. The camp was located near the border where it could not be ignored and also had a large population with a fluctuating range of residents typically over 1,000 people. On the other hand, the smallest shelter we visited had about 12 people and the largest about 200. Additionally, the camp residents were less transitory than the asylum seekers in shelters, given the nature of MPP. Under MPP, asylum seekers had a

court date and were waiting near the tent courts for their day in court, which was indefinitely disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic. With the COVID-19 lockdown of the camp, and the halting of asylum processing due to Title 42, new arrivals were no longer admitted into the camp and were instead directed to shelters or apartments. The camp existed for about a year and a half, and many lived there for much of that time. The asylum seekers in shelters that were interviewed had arrived within a few days to a few months.

Multiple asylum seekers in the shelters appeared nervous and mentioned that they had not discussed their situation with anyone else there. In August 2021, several of the organizations providing legal services stopped helping the migrants seek asylum unless they had a critical medical condition and posted this information on signs in one of the large shelters. Up until the end of August, asylum seekers deemed “vulnerable” because of a medical emergency, imminent risk of danger, or LGBTQ status, qualified to pursue their asylum cases in the US with the coordination of these organizations. Additionally, unaccompanied migrant children were exempt under the Biden Administration. These exceptions to Title 42 were the few ways allowing migrants to seek asylum in the US. Several organizations providing legal services stopped helping asylum seekers who qualified for exemptions because they believed their work was facilitating Title 42, a policy that they all want to come to an end (Kladzyk 2021). However, many of the asylum seekers were afraid of what would happen once they no longer had access to these services.

Contrary to the camps, the shelters were closed spaces making them more secure spaces. However, asylum seekers faced the same dangers when leaving the shelter. Many

of the asylum seekers in shelters explained that they were scared to leave the shelter to the point they were confined there. Despite the dangerous circumstances in Matamoros, the city is known for the resources it has available to asylum seekers. Mariana, an asylum seeker staying in one of the Matamoros shelters, explained that her family moved from another border city to Matamoros to access the resources available there. She said that a friend told her husband to come there because “[Matamoros] is better than other cities, better in that there are more resources there.” However, the improved security in the shelters did little to ease the asylum seekers’ anxieties as many still suspected the cartels they had fled were aware of their locations. One said she had health problems that she needed to address, but her fear kept her from going to the medical clinic for asylum seekers. The shelters only provided temporary safety in their situations.

Speaking to the asylum seekers, several of them complained of feeling unwell for various reasons. However, they were too afraid to leave the confines of the shelter to access the GRM medical clinic by the border. While Doctors Without Borders sent psychologists to the shelters to provide therapy for many of the asylum seekers. One of the shelters had a clinic, but the other two shelters’ asylum seekers had less access to the GRM clinic. The distance separating the asylum seekers from medical services close to the border was only half the barrier. Many were traumatized and feared what would happen if they left the safety of the shelter. One asylum seeker even said she felt safer staying in the camp over the shelter because the men of the camp would protect them. However, volunteers from the Matamoros camp discussed the lack of security in the camp and the danger for the asylum seekers that had stayed there. An asylum seeker who had lived in the Matamoros camp also recalled that cartel members would enter the camp

often. Neither living in the camp nor the shelter meant the asylum seekers reached refuge yet. Security was limited and only guaranteed while in the shelters' walls. Mariana, an asylum seeker who had experienced terrifying cartel violence, told me that someone was sending her threatening messages saying they knew where she was. Others reported similar harassment. The environment of fear led many asylum seekers to stay at the shelter rather than leave to work or access medical services. While proximity and distance created challenges for the asylum seekers, it was clear that tension, and an environment of fear follows them wherever they go in Matamoros whether in a camp or in a shelter. Hearing gun shots at night or receiving explicit harassment intensified their anxieties.

The experience of migration was dangerous regardless of location. It does not really matter whether the asylum seekers were living in the camp or in the shelter, in both situations, they experienced danger in the city and struggled to access critical survival resources. Both of these places formed in response to US policy or decision making. The challenges of camp life were replaced by challenges of shelter life. While the asylum seekers' spaces and sense of place did change, their situations in the asylum system were much the same. This analysis helps to understand how shifts in US policy have produced different outcomes in the lived experience of asylum seekers. Though Title 42 and MPP remained in place under the Biden presidency, his office has accomplished significant progress for asylum seekers within the confines of the Trump Administration's broken framework. With transformative change and a humanitarian focus, asylum seekers could be protected and treated with dignity.

## **VI. GRASSROOTS REFUGEE GOVERNANCE**

As the Trump Administration's policies of expulsion catalyzed a humanitarian crisis along the US-Mexico border, ordinary people have taken initiative to mitigate the damage of MPP and Title 42. With practically no resources available to the asylum seekers displaced in Mexico, a collaboration of lawyers, medical workers, engineers, teachers, and other individuals from the Rio Grande Valley united to protect the asylum seekers of Matamoros. In the previous chapter, I outlined the challenges that service providers and asylum seekers experienced in the camp. I emphasized the number of legal and environmental barriers that challenged asylum seekers' daily survival. This chapter focuses on the solidarity between the volunteers living in the US border communities and asylum seekers emphasizing their agency in the global refugee regime. Divided into two sections, the first half of the chapter discusses the grassroots organizing in Brownsville, and the second half centers the work of the asylum seekers that led in advocacy and service provision.

This chapter looks at the emergence of what I refer to as a grassroots refugee governance system. This term captures the networks, organizing, and everyday practices of sustaining the lives living in the MPP camp in face of state neglect and state-fueled human rights violations. While this system of governance peaked in visibility with the formation of the camp in Matamoros, there still remains evidence of grassroots refugee governance. Since the camp was closed and fenced off, asylum seekers and service providers carried on their work in other spaces. Rather than physically united in the one camp space, they now are spread across multiple places in Matamoros and Brownsville with solidarity bridging each space.

This chapter also emphasizes the role of asylum seekers in their self-advocacy and survival. While other literature has emphasized the challenges and successes of outside volunteers, this research underscores the efforts of asylum seekers in supporting one another. This highlights significant evidence of asylum seekers' leadership and agency. However, I argue despite these efforts, immigration reform is necessary to provide substantive relief to asylum seekers. The work of the asylum seekers and their advocates sustained the refugees' survival for years, but tens of thousands remained in desperate need of protection. It will take fundamental change to reverse the damage done to the asylum system during the Trump presidency.

This chapter addresses the second research question: 2) How did humanitarian aid workers, immigration lawyers, medical service providers, and asylum-seekers organized in response to the lack of state protection and social services for asylum seekers? In reflection of the camp and in recognition of the current heroes working with the asylum seekers, this chapter outlines the origins of the grassroots movement, describes the organizations working with asylum seekers, and highlights the significant work of asylum seekers in their self-advocacy.

## **Call to Action in Brownsville**

### *History of Advocacy*

Working side by side with the asylum seekers, community members including lawyers, medical providers, engineers, and teachers from Brownsville mobilized to advocate for the asylum seekers in Matamoros. Volunteers prioritized the needs and wants of the asylum seekers while working in the camp, supported their autonomy and

dignity, and advocated for them within the courts and on the streets. Brownsville residents crossing the border to Matamoros witnessed firsthand the humanitarian crisis created by metering and MPP. On these trips, they saw hundreds of asylum seekers waiting at the end of the bridge and in the plaza and felt compelled to help them. Other volunteers and lawyers saw the impacts on the US side of the border in the courts and at the Humanitarian Respite Center (HRC) in McAllen, which served asylum seekers paroled from ICE detention.

In Brownsville, Texas, a community of advocates developed over the years dedicated to caring for and defending the migrants and asylum seekers coming to the US-Mexico border. A transborder community of migrant advocates emerged as individuals witnessed the impacts of US immigration practices and laws at the border. However, for many volunteers, 2014 was a key starting point for the response that grew over the following years and formed a strong coalition during the Trump presidency.

In 2014, several before MPP, CBP reported apprehending 49,959 unaccompanied minors in the Rio Grande Sector where Brownsville is located, increasing 132% from the previous year (CBP, 2015). With thousands of unaccompanied migrant children coming to the border, many advocates commented that this period was when more people became involved in activism with asylum seekers. Attorney Mary Jones described the Humanitarian Respite Center as the origin of the humanitarian response, and from there stemmed her own legal orientation project to serve the asylum seekers that were coming to the HRC. As with Jones's volunteer work, many of the advocates were inspired by one another and began by noticing a need and finding where their skills or expertise could be of use. Several of the early volunteers actively recruited members of their community to

join them in helping the asylum seekers in whatever way they could. Sister Dolores, leading Catholic Charities' response, described herself as "just a normal human being." However, in the humanitarian crisis that US immigration policies have created, the "normal human beings" were the people doing the most incredible work to protect and care for the asylum seekers. In the absence of state-led humanitarian relief, the advocates along the border stepped forward to fill the void. These individuals who led the response actively recruited members of their community to join the fight against dehumanizing immigration policies together forming a grassroots movement. In spite of the inspiring heroism of ordinary people witnessed in the grassroots refugee governance of the camp at the local level, this grassroots refugee governance was an insufficient replacement for the state-level infrastructure, services, and security states or the UN or states can and should have provided.

The community of advocates in Brownsville fulfilled a variety of services that have changed over time to sustain life in the camp. Before the MPP camp existed, many of the volunteers had previously volunteered with immigrants and asylum seekers in the US. Lawyer Mary Jones discussed her work at the HRC in McAllen where she volunteered preparing meals for paroled asylum seekers. As with many others, she involved herself more as she witnessed the impacts of US immigration policy as a resident in the Rio Grande Valley and through her career as a lawyer. When she saw in court the number of asylum seekers increase in response to Trump's Zero Tolerance family separation policy, she took it upon herself to attend court hearings and maintain a record of families to later reunite those who had been separated under this practice.



Similarly, organizer and volunteer Amanda Gomez was motivated by her experiences talking with migrants at the HRC who had just been released from ICE detention:

I was listening and speaking with the asylum seekers in the respite center, and listening to the very poor nutrition, the abuse, verbal, sexual, physical, mental abuse that they were putting up with going through those areas. And I heard so many stories about their documents being confiscated that prove that they had guardianship over the children that they were coming with that they had familial relations, never mind parental relations, and they weren't given back, they'd lose them.

Susan Silva, a lawyer with a long record of volunteer work in Latin America and work with asylum seekers, reflecting on the US's long history of racist and exclusionary policies, pinpointed 2016 as a point in time when US immigration policies and procedures, "just got more amplified, more racist, more xenophobic." For Susan, 2018 was a time when she stepped up her activism on both sides of the US-Mexico border to respond to Zero Tolerance in the US. As both border residents and activists, these interviewees encountered asylum seekers in their daily lives, witnessing the devastating impacts of US immigration policies that were intensified during the Trump presidency.

### *Formation of a Grassroots Movement*

In 2018 Brownsville residents who crossed the border in their commute or to visit family were watching a growing number of migrants wait on and at the foot of the bridges in Matamoros due to metering. The Angry Tías and Abuelas of the RGV and Team Brownsville were two of the most active organizations, whose members mobilized quickly upon witnessing the asylum seekers in Matamoros. Angry Tías and Abuelas member Tina Dessommes recalled the origins of the organization in response seeing asylum seekers waiting at the bridges, "within five days, they were meeting and got a

name... In a few weeks, they put together the first protest against separation of families.” As asylum seekers were forced to wait in Mexico through metering, local resident Jeff Stone explained, “somebody noticed, and they got in touch with this little cohort of special ed teachers. And that became Team Brownsville, heroically bringing over, breakfast, kind of a late supper every day, twice a day carting stuff across.” Beginning with some Brownsville residents witnessing asylum seekers waiting by the International Gateway Bridge, these individuals organized and began making trips back to the bridge to deliver food and water to the asylum seekers. These experiences of seeing the asylum seekers and the struggles they face at the border drove many border residents to step forward and volunteer.

The Brownsville advocates supported asylum seekers through other acts of resistance. Organizer Amanda Gomez recalled advocates escorting asylum seekers to the border to support them and pressure border patrol to honor the migrants’ rights to request asylum in the US. After witnessing the cruelty of US immigration policies, practices, and agencies, members of the border community came together to help the asylum seekers who had been left behind by the US and Mexican governments.

For many volunteers, they witnessed the cruelty of US immigration policies during their work in Brownsville or in their commutes across the border. They saw in their daily lives the impacts of practices such as metering and policies like MPP. With metering, those crossing the border witnessed asylum seekers waiting on the bridge from Matamoros to Brownsville. They saw the need that the people waiting had for the basic necessities of food, water, and shelter. Donna Gables from Team Brownsville explained how she saw the people on the bridge in the cold and rain and knew she had to do

something to help. The volunteers' proximity to the border exposed them to the dehumanization of asylum seekers by US agencies and laws. For the volunteers in Brownsville, their experiences witnessing the US and Mexico's neglect for the asylum seekers compelled them to start working to make a difference.

Through social media outlets such as Facebook, these grassroots organizations have constructed a community that stretches across the United States. When a heavy rainstorm flooded the camp, Team Brownsville replaced the lost tents and supplies using the funding from local and distant donors. Thanking the online community of advocates, volunteers, and donors, Team Brownsville posted on Facebook, "without the generosity of so many contributors to our work, we would not have been able to act so quickly." In their posts, Team Brownsville emphasized not only the practical uses of donations but also the support that donations represented for the asylum seekers:

Every donation provided, every sign that someone cares and is continuing to think about the asylum seekers' needs, is a little ray of light. Did you make masks and send them to us? They've crossed into the encampment or are being used in the bus station. Did you send clothing, sandals, hygiene supplies, lanterns, books, materials for Escuelita, backpacks, etc., etc., etc. They're being used every day by grateful people. Did you contribute funds toward food, essential needs, shelter? It's being used to allow life to continue uninterrupted, with basic needs met. (Team Brownsville, Facebook)

The community that these grassroots organizations created has not only provided for the asylum seekers' necessities but also boosted their morale and provided spiritual and emotional support.

Though the camp no longer existed, Team Brownsville and other organizations continued to fundraise and collect supplies to help support the asylum seekers in shelters in Matamoros (Figure 10). Pastor Isaiah, who has run a large shelter, would carry the supplies they gathered from Texas to Mexico when he went back and forth between his

home in Brownsville and his church in Matamoros. When he picked us up in Brownsville to go visit the shelter, he took a collection of supplies from organizations in Texas for the asylum seekers. Access to resources in the US remained critical for the asylum seekers in Matamoros. This grassroots movement that extended across borders and throughout a social media network in the US was essential for the survival of shelters in Matamoros.



Figure 10. One of Team Brownsville's storage sites for donations. Credit: Elise Arellano-Thompson

These organizations continued their work in Texas as well. Team Brownsville volunteers have waited outside the local bus station every day to welcome paroled asylum seekers to the US. Figure 11 shows the welcome table where Team Brownsville distributed supplies to asylum seekers. They would provide a meal and a backpack full of supplies. While migrants waited in US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention facilities, the agency took many of their personal belongings as well as hair ties and shoelaces as a supposed safety prevention. Even after they have been determined safe to be released in the US, ICE delivers the asylum seekers to the station in handcuffs and

shackles around their ankles. After release from detention, these asylum seekers are greeted by people who care about them. Team Brownsville's work restores dignity and humanity to the asylum seekers who have suffered tremendous hardship.



Figure 11. LAMP lab with Team Brownsville distributing supplies to paroled asylum seekers at Brownsville bus station. Credit: Elise Arellano-Thompson

### **The Asylum Seekers' Leadership**

The ordinary people of Brownsville, Texas have served an important role in the advocacy of asylum seekers in Mexico. Their formation of a grassroots movement has played a critical role in the asylum seekers' survival. They provided essential resources and services to the camp and then to the shelters in Matamoros. Throughout this work, they always prioritized the needs of the asylum seekers and involved them in their work.

With the asylum seekers at the center of everything, their leadership became most important. The asylum seekers have organized and advocated for themselves rather than solely relying on the American volunteers. While there has been a necessity for the advocacy of the more privileged and influential Americans, the asylum seekers were agents in their survival as well.

In the previous chapter discussing the camp, I described the asylum seekers' role in the camp. Many of them played important leadership roles in distribution of resources and worked hand-in-hand with volunteers to maintain the camp facilities. This was when asylum seekers became integrated into the grassroots refugee governance system. Since the camp was dismantled, asylum seekers were scattered across the city of Matamoros in various shelters and other housing situations. In the camp, there was a strong sense of community. Upon first impression, this solidarity was lacking in the shelters. There was less trust between asylum seekers, but there was still evidence of their community with one another. The asylum seekers serving as leaders fostered this sense of community in Matamoros despite the spatial fragmentation of the asylum seekers. The camp had served before not only as a shelter for some asylum seekers but also as a center for all asylum seekers in the area in need of medical care or other resources. Even without a centralized location to facilitate service and resource distribution, several asylum seekers stood out as leaders.

This section discusses the significant role and agency of asylum seekers in their own advocacy and survival. In particular, I follow the leadership of the asylum seekers working for Global Response Management (GRM), those in the shelters, and those working with the LGBTQ community. Two asylum seekers working with GRM had lived

in the camp and not been able to cross to the US with many of the other asylum seekers there. As employees of GRM, they directed their energy towards helping others and facilitating the work of the clinic. In the shelters, the women especially played an important role in fostering community and bringing comfort in small ways during such a tense time for the asylum seekers. Finally, this section discusses the important work that an asylum seeker in the US and his friend in Mexico have done to shelter the highly vulnerable LGBTQ asylum seekers in their community. This section recognizes these leaders and underscores the many challenges they encounter in their daily lives. Despite the difficulty of their work, they put in the effort to support one another.

### *Leadership in Medical Care*

One of the most critical resources available to asylum seekers in Matamoros was the Global Response Management (GRM) clinic. While the camp existed, GRM was based in a mobile clinic that operated in the camp but also served asylum seekers living in other parts of the city. The director of the clinic explained that GRM used a military field hospital model to provide low-resource solutions in high-risk areas. Later, GRM was established in a permanent structure and to provide medical services to the thousands of asylum seekers in shelters around the city. Every day, a long line would form outside the building. Hundreds of asylum seekers would wait in the heat to receive COVID-19 tests, required before crossing at the port of entry, or to receive more urgent care. For those who received exemptions to cross the border, taking a COVID-19 test at GRM was essential as a negative result is required to cross. With so many people in need of a



variety of medical services, the scene at GRM could be chaotic. However, the staff was incredibly resourceful and cooperative under pressure.



Figure 12. View from GRM balcony of former asylum seeker camp site and first group of asylum seekers lining up to receive GRM services. Credit: Kathryn McDaniel

Of the GRM staff, a few were asylum seekers themselves. These individuals were critical for facilitating the work at GRM. Many of the medical volunteers did not speak Spanish fluently, so having a cultural and linguistic interpreter as part of the staff was important. In my fieldwork, I witnessed the incredible generosity and drive of Mateo and Pablo. These two volunteers had the personal background necessary to support the many other asylum seekers who need GRM's services. While my research team volunteered at GRM, multiple emergencies were occurring at once. Meanwhile, at least a hundreds of people were lining up outside in the heat to receive COVID-19 tests, which were required not only for crossing the border, but also before staying in a shelter long-term. Figure 12



shows the parking lot in front GRM that would fill up with asylum seekers lining up to receive the clinic's services. With relaxed demeanors, Mateo and Pablo worked with their community in both the day-to-day work of administering COVID-19 tests to as well as interpreting for doctors addressing patients in need of urgent care. Despite the hectic situations with limited supplies, these two remained calm.

Though they appeared strong and confident at work, Mateo and Pablo struggled with their personal circumstances. Both men had fled violence in Honduras and lived in the Matamoros camp before it was closed. Mateo had migrated from Honduras after he was falsely accused of a crime and targeted by the police:

The police captured me and my friends. They captured us and tortured us. They beat us up and everything. They tried to accuse us of a crime with no proof. They brought us to jail and everything, but they couldn't prove anything in the crime they accused us of. We came out free, but after we were out of jail, we had problems with the gangs.

He was obligated to leave his home with his partner and daughter to escape the persecution he experienced. The three lived in the camp and were MPP asylum seekers. His partner and young daughter were able to cross when Biden initially terminated MPP. The most difficult moment for him was seeing his family leave for the US without him. He said that was the worst thing to happen to him, to be alone.

In his home country of Honduras, Pablo had worked as a social worker, but had struggled to find job opportunities. He had decided to dedicate his life to serving others in his home country until he was violently threatened by the cartels while working for a school. Pablo explained that in his country, the gang members rape young women and girls and the children end up impoverished and collecting trash from as young as five

years old. As a social worker, he joined a project actively working to disrupt these patterns that the cartels create:

I decided to spend my life helping my people for three and a half years until I received death threats for not allowing the organized crime to do things in the schools. So, they told the pastor supervising me that if I did not leave... they would cut me into pieces, skin me, cut off my head, a ton of these things, and in front of the children... This project... took charge of going and taking in these children, giving them a formal education, taking away the mentality of laziness and the trash, and getting them to study. So, I decided to dedicate three and a half years to this work, so I would not be contributing to something that has no place in my country.

Pablo's work with the children of the gang members was his attempt to keep the children from falling in the vicious cycles fueling organized crime, to save the children and his country. In response, the cartels targeted him and threatened him with horrible violence. Despite the circumstances that forced him to leave his home, Pablo continued to serve others once he had left his country and migrated to the US-Mexico border. His professional experience and bravery prepared him to transition smoothly into the intense environment of the GRM clinic.

Both Pablo and Mateo have applied for asylum under MPP since they have been to the border, and neither want to cross illegally because they know it could lead to their deportation, preventing them from returning legally again. They have fled situations that obligated them to leave for their own safety and survival. They each explained the dangers of migrating through Mexico and living in Matamoros. Pablo described the anxiety that comes with traveling in Mexico as a migrant or asylum seeker:

Because you do not know who is by your side, when you arrive at a hotel, you do not know if they will open your doors the next day and leave you for dead. Or, it could be that in the same hotel they come looking for you to rob or assault you, simply because you were asleep in your bed. If you are traveling with others, one of you sleeps while the other stays awake.

Mateo, too, had experiences with the danger in Mexico. During his first two weeks in Mexico, he was beat up by a group of young men. In the camp, it was also unsafe. According to Mateo, the Mexican immigration officials were one with the gangs, so there was no legitimate protection for the migrants in the camp. Although they were not able to cross to the US with their families due to previous US immigration infractions, they have dedicated their time to supporting the other asylum seekers in the community while pursuing their asylum claims. Their only wish is to reach safety in the US and reunite with their families.

### ***Women in the Shelters***

One of the shelters in Matamoros originated in a church. The pastor started his church as a hip-hop church with the mission of evangelizing to the youth of Matamoros drawing them to God and service and away from the local gangs. However, after some time, Pastor Isaiah noticed the asylum crisis occurring in Matamoros and reoriented to serve the asylum seekers in the community. Initially helping provide supplies to the camp, Pastor Isaiah later opened his church up as a shelter. When we visited, there were about 200 asylum seekers staying there, many who had been there for several months. Under Pastor Isaiah's leadership, the asylum seekers ran their shelter all working together. This grassroots effort led by Pastor Isaiah worked to protect the asylum seekers while giving them autonomy and leadership opportunities in the shelter and church.

The church pictured in Figure 13 has been an important source of community for the asylum seekers. Many of the asylum seekers we interviewed mentioned their faith and thanked God for what they had and for their survival. Though not everyone attended,

those that did took that time to give thanks and to build community with the rest of the congregation. When taking the collection, almost everyone contributed a little something. Their sermons and songs stated that they gained great strength from God. In the shelter, hope was essential to moving forward. Together in the church services, the asylum seekers had the opportunity to join together in solidarity.



Figure 13. Pastor Isaiah's church where asylum seekers gathered to attend church service  
Credit: Kathryn McDaniel

When touring the shelter, Pastor Isaiah also showed us the classrooms for activities and Sunday School with the children. Part of my fieldwork was volunteering with the children in the shelter. We coordinated games and activities for the children to entertain them for the day. One of the challenges of living in the shelter is the endless waiting. With little to occupy themselves, the asylum seekers' anxieties are heightened. When we played Loteria and did crafts with them, the children were full of joy and able

to forget about daily stress for a time (Figure 14). The opportunities for the children in the shelter were valuable for boosting morale.



Figure 14. Children in Pastor Isaiah's shelter gathered together to do crafts.  
Credit: Elise Arellano-Thompson

The women asylum seekers especially contributed to the function of the shelter. For meals, a group of about ten women gathered together to prepare their national cuisines for everyone. Pastor Isaiah explained that the asylum seekers staying there would volunteer in groups to make and serve food for everyone else. While we were there, the women prepared and served a Honduran meal with elements of the local foods. Spending hours in the heat, with limited resources, these women put aside their personal struggles to feed hundreds of people. As with their neighbors, they treated our research

team with kindness and hospitality. Generally, at the shelter, many people seem restless and anxious. The endless waiting that is the current norm for asylum seekers, especially given the dangerous circumstances of the city, creates a depressing environment in the shelter. However, during lunch, the attitude of the asylum seekers lightened. The positivity of the women in the kitchen was infectious and helped the others in the shelter relax for a short while (Figure 15). Meals were a time for everyone to escape, enjoy familiar foods, and socialize. However, like the other asylum seekers, the women volunteering carried the burdens of the traumas that compelled them to flee their homes. Several of the asylum seekers I interviewed explained that they had kept their struggles to themselves. Despite their own struggles, the women of the shelter brought a strong spirit to the dinner table that fostered morale in the shelter.



Figure 15. Women preparing food in the shelter kitchen. Credit: Dr. Jennifer Devine



### *Leaders in the LGBTQ Community*

While all asylum seekers experience hardship in their migration journeys, members of the LGBTQ community are particularly vulnerable and receive additional discrimination for their identities. There are three main factors that augment the dangers that LGBTQ asylum seekers encounter. First, there has been a lack of services and shelters to house and protect LGBTQ asylum seekers. The majority of shelters are faith-based and in some cases reject members of the LGBTQ community. Second, because of the social exclusion of the LGBTQ community, drug-trafficking organizations regularly target trans and gay migrants. Cartels view transwomen especially as an object of exploitation for prostitution and extortion. Together these factors created a necessity for services and shelters that particularly serve LGBTQ asylum seekers.

Given this context, asylum seeker Julio and his friend Carlos founded and operate the Rainbow Bridge shelter to serve LGBTQ asylum seekers and their families. Their leadership has been important for addressing the needs of a highly vulnerable migrant community. Their own stories as migrant, gay men exemplify the necessity for shelters and organizations oriented protecting LGBTQ migrants at the border. Additionally, they took on challenges and risks to maintain the shelter and provided hope for their community.

Typically, migrant shelters have been run by churches or organizations affiliated with a church. Two of the three shelters I visited during my fieldwork were in churches. As explained by Carlos, “the majority of those that give help are from a church. And as they are very dedicated to their religion, well they look at us the LGBT as bad.” This rejection by the churches left the LGBTQ asylum seekers at much higher risk. Shelter

was much more limited for LGBTQ asylum seekers. The discrimination in the churches made the Rainbow Bridge shelter especially important for LGBTQ asylum seekers.

Julio and Carlos face ongoing challenges to maintain their shelter. Carlos explained how their first location for the shelter was too small to house everyone. Later, they had to leave in response to the danger in the area and lack of security from cartels. Another location presented challenges because their ability to rent was under the condition that they do not make “much noise or scandal.” As Carlos said, these requests were practically impossible as “it’s inevitable to make sound.” Additionally, they explained the hurdle of the negative public sentiment towards asylum seekers. It was challenging for Carlos and Julio to find a space willing to rent for the purpose of an LGBTQ asylum seeker shelter.

Julio was a gay asylum seeker who struggled himself to find housing under MPP. He met Carlos who let him stay in his home. When Julio was finally able to cross to the US to seek asylum, he and Carlos established the Rainbow Bridge shelter to house other LGBTQ asylum seekers. The shelter would be an expansion of a program that began with Julio when he lived in the MPP camp. Recognizing a need for a project dedicated to serving LGBTQ asylum seekers, Julio initiated a social services program for the community in the camp. Starting with a business start-up idea to make money during the pandemic, Julio noticed the unique needs of his community of LGBTQ asylum seekers in the camp and decided instead to shift to establishing a social services program. He explained further:

We chose a target and I belong to the LGBTQ community. So, we decided to start with this community, which was one of the most vulnerable in the camp. And that is where I realized that these people don’t need a job or to create a business. They need food for their next meal, they need a place to sleep at night, to be allowed to



live at the mouth of the river where they were staying at that time... And that is where Rainbow Bridge came from, and we got to work. From there the shelter emerged.

In recognition of the specific needs of LGBTQ asylum seekers, Julio set out to help protect this highly vulnerable community. Given the lack of shelters available to LGBTQ asylum seekers, he saw that this was a priority for his community's survival along the border. Especially when understood within the broader context of potential danger in Mexican border cities, shelter has been the most critical resource for LGBTQ asylum seekers.

Migrants are regular victims of cartel violence and lack a legitimate form of protection from the police. Further, DTO's especially have targeted LGBTQ asylum seekers for extortion and sex trafficking because they face social stigma not only as migrants but also as members of the LGBTQ community. Carlos, who has experienced cartel violence due to his identity as a gay man, explained why the cartels target LGBTQ migrants for acts of violence. "Sometimes the cartels here and there, they see that someone is trans or gay, and they are more vulnerable to extortion and violence." Often, he said, the cartels will kidnap transwomen for prostitution because "they [cartels] see them [transwomen] around in their dresses, and for them [cartels], it's like a gold mine." The key reason is that these transwomen that the cartels kidnap and victimize cannot report their situations to the police. When asked if it had to do with sexualization of transwomen and an existing market interested in them, Carlos responded, "No, it's because [the cartels] think that no one is going to believe [the transwomen]. For being who they are, the police will not pay attention to them. And besides, the cartels are linked with the police anyway." So, the problem is two-sided. LGBTQ asylum seekers,

especially transwomen, are particular targets of the cartels dominating the area and additionally experience social stigma. Julio echoed Carlos's comments about the struggles of trans migrants:

With transwomen, if they are kidnapped, there is no one to search for them. There are no family members, a mom, a dad, nor a social group... So, for the [cartels], it is good because they never are denounced over kidnapping transwomen, right? So, the police are never looking for them. That makes it easy for the [cartels] to manage them, and exhibit them, do many things to them without the police ever charging them for a crime of kidnapping. Well, it's the *machismo* and the belief that that makes them considered potential people to kidnap, to be able to use them to do this work in Mexico.

For LGBTQ migrants, traversing the border is very dangerous. DTOs target and victimize LGBTQ migrants based on their queer identities. This dynamic makes LGBTQ asylum seekers a social group that is particularly vulnerable to violence and discrimination.

As the manager of the shelter, Carlos heard many stories directly from the asylum seekers he helps to shelter. He explained that these stories are often so traumatic that he can hardly listen to them anymore.

Everyone that has passed through [the shelter] here tell me their stories. They say, 'Hey they just killed my friend.' They have shown me photos and videos of how the bodies were left: beaten with baseball bats, stoned, stabbed. It is a lot for me. I say, no just tell me. Don't show me photos because it is too much. 'Here, I have one where a guy sent me a photo of my friend and how he was left.' I told him. No, don't show me. It is too intense.

The dangers that LGBTQ asylum seekers experience during migration is an expectation of their journey. Carlos himself had a harrowing experience when he and his twin brother were kidnapped and held hostage by a cartel in Mexico. In Julio's home country, the police and gangs attacked him because they saw him kiss his partner goodbye. Knowing from their own experiences the risks that LGBTQ migrants face, Julio and Carlos operate the Rainbow Bridge shelter to provide protection for those in their community.

This chapter has detailed the organizations, networks, and everyday practices of what I refer to as a grassroots refugee governance system. Through building a grassroots movement, the advocates of Brownsville took on the huge task of caring for the asylum seekers in Matamoros. In their daily lives, they witnessed the negative impacts of US immigration policy. They encountered asylum seekers in US courtrooms or in their regular trips across the border and felt compelled to do something. As they could see, the US immigration policies have actively harmed asylum seekers rather than providing them much needed protection. In the absence of state action, these advocates stepped forward to address the humanitarian crisis unfolding around them.

Notably, the volunteers from Texas mobilized hand-in-hand with the asylum seekers themselves. Rather than approaching the situation from a place of superiority, they actively involved the asylum seekers in decision-making and resource distribution in the camp. Together, the asylum seekers and American volunteers worked to create a camp where asylum seekers could survive the endless waiting under MPP. By establishing a collaborative system, the asylum seekers were able to have some agency in a situation completely out of their control. This agency was evident in the camp environment and remains significant in current advocacy efforts now that the camp no longer exists.

The leadership of the asylum seekers can be observed in the medical clinic, the shelters, and even remotely from Texas. They have formed a widespread community and serve as advocates for one another. Working together with advocates in the US they have done significant work to ensure one another's survival or at least share some comfort in a time of great hardship. Mateo and Pablo are working in the clinic, facilitating access to

critical medical services for asylum seekers across the city. The women of Pastor Isaiah's shelter bring a taste of home and comfort to their community. Julio and Carlos have committed to protecting their community of LGBTQ asylum seekers whose vulnerability manifests in particular ways. Above all, their experiences as asylum seekers make them experts in providing this care. More than anyone, they know what their community needs as they all struggle together under MPP. Their collaboration with the American advocates is essential to the efficacy and financial support of the grassroots movement.

While laudable, the grassroots refugee governance that formed in Brownsville and Matamoros is insufficient to address the humanitarian crisis at the border and cannot adequately replace the organizing capabilities and resources of states and IGOs. While the volunteers have been able to keep many of the asylum seekers alive throughout the course of MPP, they can only do so much for so long. Many asylum seekers have been waiting at the border for years and cannot return home or endure the circumstances at the border indefinitely. Fundamental change that centers the US's humanitarian obligation to asylum seekers would mark a significant improvement in the US asylum process.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Since the closure of the Matamoros camp, asylum seekers coming to the border experience precarity but in different locations. The Biden Administration has met many challenges to repairing the asylum system dismantled under the Trump presidency, leaving newly arrived asylum seekers in limbo. Title 42 and MPP point to the end of asylum in the US, and with thousands of vulnerable people in need, the US must take action to find humanitarian solutions. Returning home or remaining in Mexican border cities has been an insecure option that has caused tremendous suffering for the asylum seekers. The circumstances are dangerous in the border cities, and migrants are at risk of rape, murder, kidnapping, extortion, and recruitment from drug-trafficking organizations (Slack, 2019). To force asylum seekers to wait indefinitely, regardless of the availability of shelter or resources, is cruel.

US policies of expulsion shaped and contributed to a crisis for asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border. With the Trump administration's policies restricting asylum in place, the situation for asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border has remained uncertain. The Biden Administration made some progress towards repairing the asylum system by terminating MPP and processing asylum seekers who were living in the camps along the border and still had open MPP cases as of February 2021 (UNHCR, 2021). However, there were still thousands of MPP applicants whose cases were denied in absentia or who were otherwise denied the chance to pursue their asylum case. Of the over 70,000 asylum seekers enrolled in MPP, only about 25,000 who had active cases at the time of MPP's suspension in 2021 were allowed to cross to the US (DHS, 2021). According to the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC), by the end of May 2021, only

about 10,375 asylum seekers under MPP were able to cross, leaving out the 16,138 whose case were pending and required to remain in Mexico until given further instruction to cross (TRAC, 2021). On June 1, 2021, Biden officially ended MPP and allowed for MPP asylum seekers who were denied for missing their hearing to apply to cross.

The process of crossing asylum seekers to the US has been slow and halted by the Texas and Missouri cases against the Biden Administration ordering it to reimplement MPP. In August of 2021, the administration was forced to reimplement MPP by a federal court in Texas (American Immigration Council, 2022a; DHS, 2022b). Starting in December of 2021, the US implemented MPP 2.0 with revisions to the original iteration while maintaining the core element of returning asylum seekers to Mexico to wait for their court dates. On June 30, 2022, the Supreme Court decided in favor of the Biden Administration against Texas and Missouri, ruling the US had the authority to terminate MPP (DHS, 2022a). This ruling was hopeful, finally confirming the DHS's authority to end MPP and begin progress towards an asylum system founded on humanitarian obligation.

This thesis used qualitative methods of analysis to study interviews with asylum seekers and service providers and participant observations in shelters and volunteer sites. I used these methods to respond to two research questions. 1) Drawing on the case study of Matamoros, Mexico, how did the implementation of MPP and Title 42 impact asylum-seekers at the U.S.-Mexico border? 2) How did humanitarian aid workers, immigration lawyers, medical service providers, and asylum-seekers organized in response to the lack of state protection and social services for asylum seekers? The interview and observation

data illuminate the experiences of asylum seekers and demonstrate the outcomes that US policy produces.

This analysis supports three main arguments: 1) US immigration policies initiated under the Trump Administration created a humanitarian crisis for asylum seekers arriving at the US-Mexico border, 2) At the local level, people from the border communities have worked with the asylum seekers to help them survive the dangerous conditions in Mexican border cities while waiting to seek asylum, but state power is necessary to adequately protect the asylum seekers, and 3) The circumstances that asylum seekers face in Matamoros, Mexico serve as a case study illustrating the impacts of policies of exclusion, which are mirrored across the world.

My analysis demonstrates how US policies, particularly MPP, have formed a humanitarian crisis for asylum seekers. Additionally, I outline the numerous hardships that asylum seekers faced in the camp, emphasizing the cruelty of laws excluding asylum seekers. Vulnerable asylum seekers face social stigma, environmental challenges, and risk of violence from DTOs while waiting indefinitely in Mexican border cities. US policies and procedures have actively endangered asylum seekers in Mexico and require fundamental change.

This research further elaborates how border communities and asylum seekers have created a grassroots refugee governance system to advocate and care for the asylum seekers in their local communities. Local advocates stepped forward in the absence of state action to help the asylum seekers in Matamoros survive throughout MPP. Additionally, the interviews and observations reveal the agency of the asylum seekers evident in their support for one another in the clinic and in the shelters. However, as

incredible the achievements of the volunteers and asylum seekers was, it will take change in US policy to provide the asylum seekers with relief and protection. While examples of local successes at the local level, the camp and the shelters are evidence of a failure in the asylum system at the international scale. A humanitarian perspective in immigration policy is essential to mending asylum.

This research contributes to the bodies of literature on the shift from policies of deportation to policies of exclusion and grassroots migrant social movements. Additionally, this thesis has real world impacts through its examination of asylum seekers' experiences. First, this case study illustrates the impacts of policies of exclusion and expulsion as these laws apply to asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border. Title 42 and MPP specifically have resulted in devastating consequences for the asylum seekers at the border. This thesis supplements the breadth of scholarship analyzing policies of expulsion that aim to end asylum. These policies can be viewed as part of a global trend toward the "death of asylum" (Mountz, 2020). It is important to acknowledge and continue examining the US's role in this new norm for the global asylum and refugee regimes. This case study provides further evidence of the damaging results of such policies. Second, the case study of the border community in Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Tamaulipas highlights the power and limited agency of ordinary people and asylum seekers themselves. This thesis demonstrates the incredible accomplishments of transnational immigration advocates as well as the limitations to their work. I contribute to the literature on grassroots migrant social movements by elaborating the roles that asylum seekers play in their own advocacy as well as recognizing the limitations of their agency. The story of asylum in this community of advocates shows the importance of



maintaining hope. However, it also underscores the importance of demanding the US government do what is right when the people's power and agency are limited.

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