Trends in the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants in Guatemala and Mexico

This snapshot offers an analysis on how the impact of the COVID-19 crisis among refugees and migrants in Guatemala and Mexico has changed between July and November of 2020. It is based on 4Mi interviews with refugees and migrants and a few key informant interviews in Guatemala City and Tapachula. It aims to contribute towards a solid evidence base to inform targeted responses on the ground, as well as advocacy efforts related to the situation of refugees and migrants during the coronavirus pandemic.

Results presented in this snapshot are indicative: sample composition varied somewhat for each month and has not been weighted, and may therefore account for some of the differences in findings. In particular, there are slight differences by month for age and sex, and larger differences for survey location.

Key findings

- Data shows a strong increase in racism and/or xenophobia against refugees and migrants due to the pandemic: almost half of respondents (45%) reported it in November, up from only 15% in July.
- The view that it is more difficult to move within countries due to the pandemic remained relatively stable at about 25%-30% between July and October. Respondents who reported increased difficulties crossing borders decreased from 21% in July to 8% in September, but then went up again to 25% in November.
- The loss of income led to an increase in debts and rent arrears among refugees and migrants: this went from being reported by 21% of respondents who lost income in July to more than half (54%) in November.
- Despite this, optimism regarding the outlook of the pandemic increased over time, as those who believed that things were getting better went from 4% of respondents in July to 42% of respondents in November.
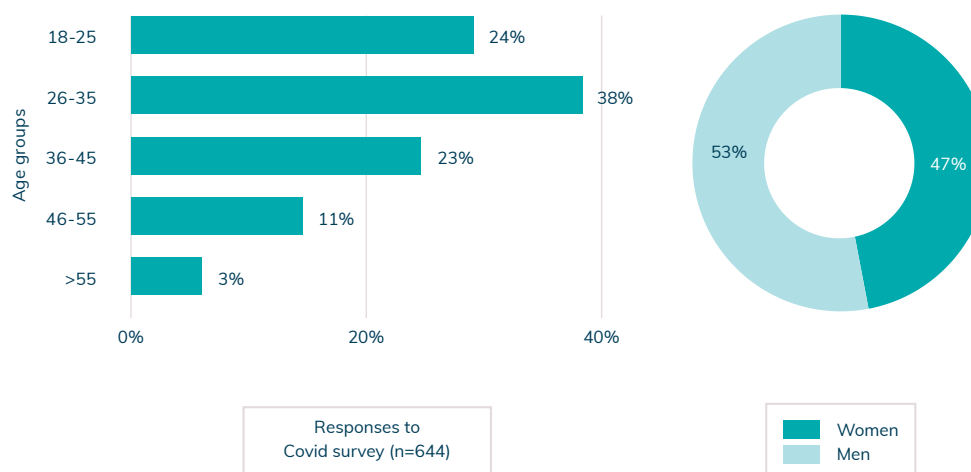
Profiles

This analysis is based on 644 surveys implemented between July 13th and November 29th, 2020, in Guatemala and Mexico, partially by face-to-face interviews and partially remotely, by phone.

62% of respondents were interviewed in Mexico and 38% in Guatemala. 87% of those surveyed in Mexico were in Tapachula City and the remaining 13% were distributed in other cities such as Ciudad Hidalgo, Tuxtla Gutierrez, Monterrey, Alvaro Obregon, Coahuila, Escuintla, Huixtla and Mazatan, among others. 93% of those surveyed in Guatemala were in the country's capital, Guatemala City, and the remaining 7% were distributed in other cities such as San Juan Sacatepéquez, Chimaltenango and Escuintla, among others.

53% of all respondents were men and 47% were women. The average age of respondents was 34 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Age range and sex

Age groups:
- 18-25: 24%
- 26-35: 38%
- 36-45: 23%
- 46-55: 11%
- >55: 3%

Women 47% / Men 53%

Responses to Covid survey (n=644)

Women
Men

Interviewees' countries of origin were: Honduras (47%), El Salvador (26%), Nicaragua (16%), Cuba (5%), Guatemala (5%), Venezuela (2%), Colombia (0,2%), and Mexico (0,3%).
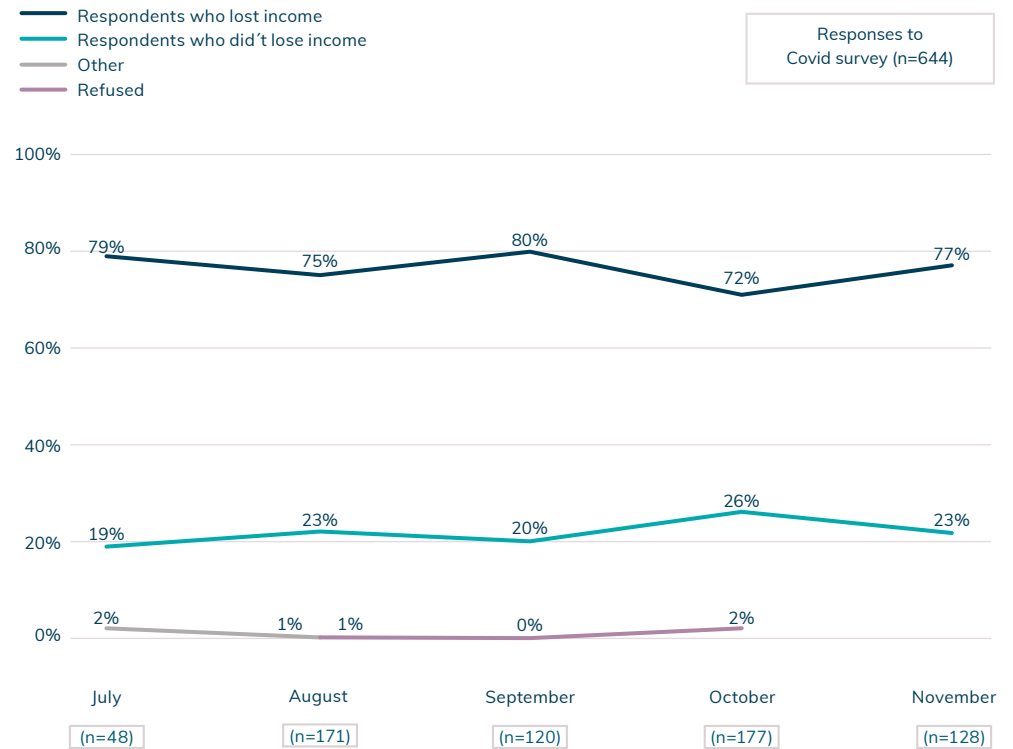
Prevention measures during the outbreak of COVID-19

Mexico and Guatemala both adopted temporary restrictions to freedom of movement as part of the measures aimed at containing the spread of COVID-19. In both countries, these measures restrained mobility within the national territory and negatively impacted the economy. The restrictions were then partially lifted, with different modalities in the two countries. In Mexico, the reopening of social, educational and economic activities began gradually in June. Guatemala began its process of economic reactivation in late July and reopened its borders in September.

Loss of income remained stable despite the lifting of restrictions

The adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has left refugees and migrants in Guatemala and Mexico struggling: respondents consistently reported loss of income between July and November. September was the month with the highest reports in loss of income, for 80% of respondents (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Have you lost income due to coronavirus restrictions?

Across the period analyzed, for 72% of all respondents between July and November, the loss of income was due to loss of work. The second most frequent reason associated with the loss of income was the loss of financial support from family members, reported by 18% of all respondents who lost income during the same period[1].

It should be noted that 16% of respondents did not report loss of income because they had no income even before the COVID-19 pandemic began. This data was included among the percentage of respondents who did not lose income in Figure 2.

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1   Note that respondents can provide more than one answer to this question, meaning that the two reasons mentioned for loss of income are not mutually exclusive. Also note that these are the only two answer options available regarding such reasons.

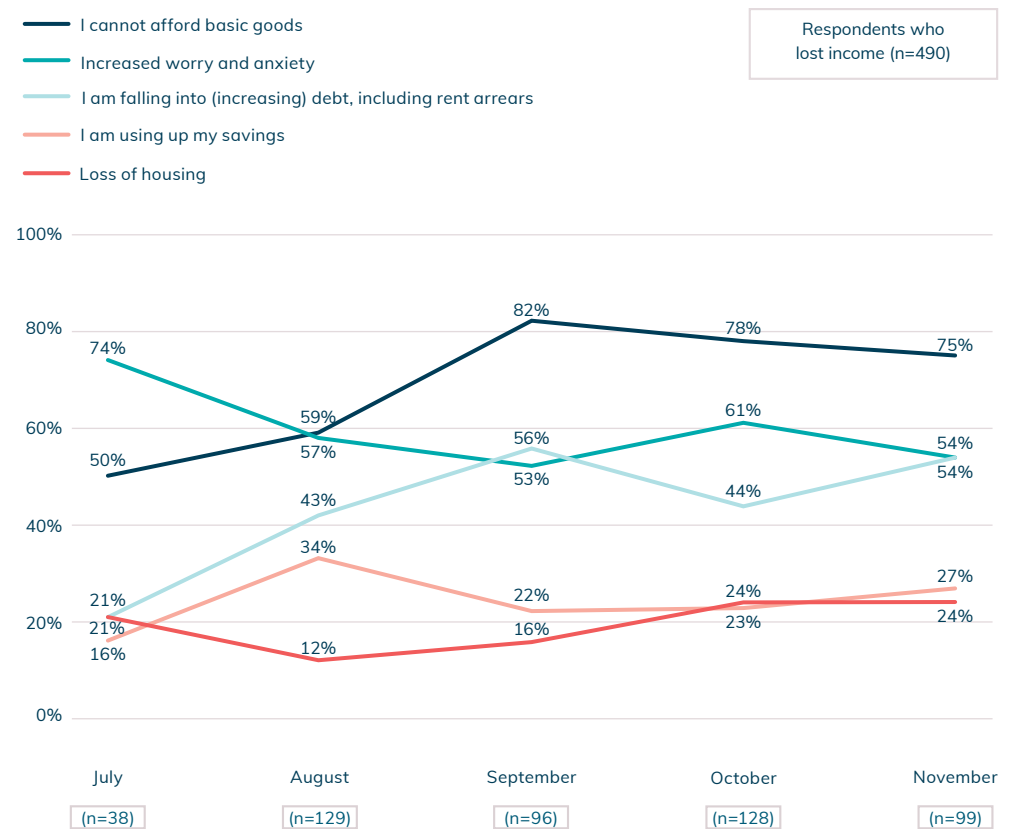# Inability to afford basic goods increased over time, together with debts

For those who lost income during the pandemic, the greatest impact has been the difficulty of acquiring basic goods, which rose from being reported by 50% of respondents who lost income in July to 82% in September, and then decreased to 75% in November. Reports of debts and rent arrears due to the loss of income have also increased, from 21% of respondents who lost income in July, to 54% at the end of the period, in November.

Loss of housing as a consequence of income loss fluctuated during the data collection period: after being reported by 21% of respondents who lost income in July, it decreased to 12% in August but then steadily increased again up to 24% in November. In the same way, the share of respondents indicating that they have been using up their savings to confront the effects of the pandemic fluctuated over time, spiking at 34% in August and decreasing at 22% in September, to then increase once again to almost one third of respondents (27%) at the end of the data collection period (see Figure 3). The depletion of savings is a negative and worrisome coping mechanism which, in the medium/long term, could leave many refugees and migrants completely disempowered and extremely vulnerable.

Respondents interviewed in Mexico more frequently reported more effects[2] of the pandemic compared to those in Guatemala, including difficulty in accessing basic goods, incurring debt and/or rent arrears, using up savings, feeling increasing worry and anxiety, and being unable to continue their migration journey, while respondents in Guatemala reported a significantly higher level of difficulty in sending remittances home.

Figure 3. What impact has the loss of income had?

Note: Respondents may select more than one answer to this question.
Note: 5 response options were omitted with averages less than 22%.
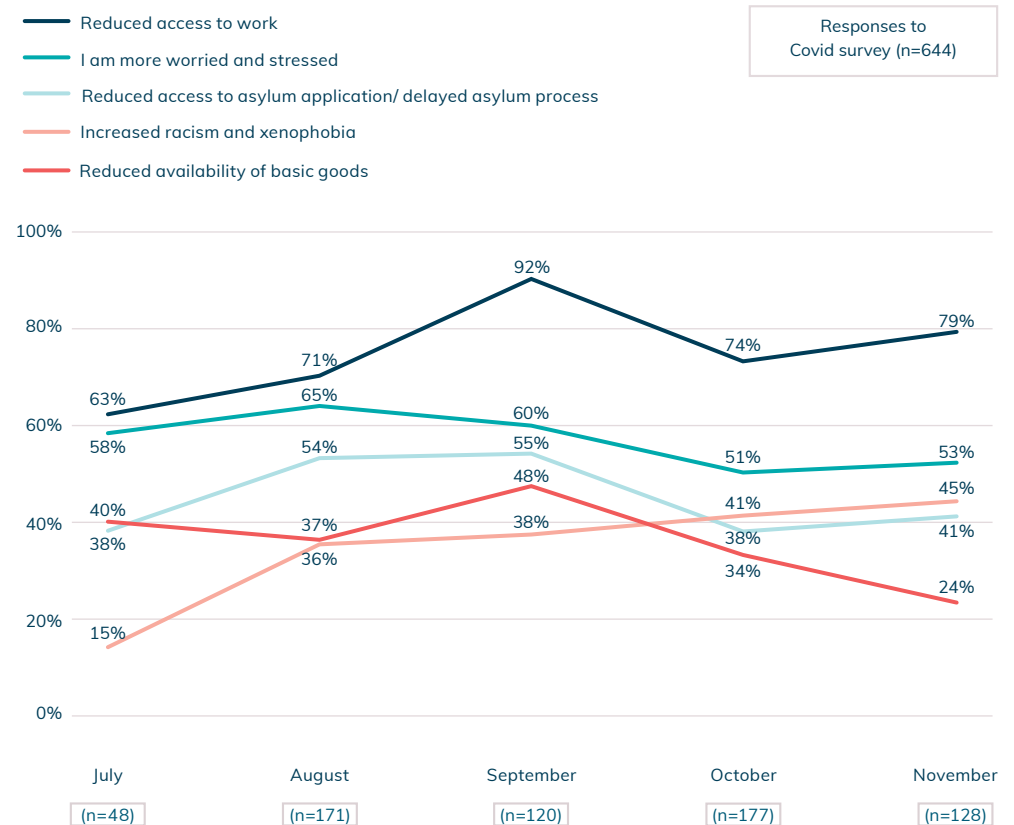
2   P-value: < 0,05

Access to work became more difficult during the pandemic

When asked what other impacts the crisis had on their day-to-day life, respondents consistently mentioned reduced access to work as the main effect. This answer showed quite an increase over the data collection period, going from being mentioned by 63% of respondents in July to 92% in September, before decreasing to a still very high 79% in November.

Racism and xenophobia against migrants also increased during the pandemic: it was mentioned by 15% of respondents in July and by 45% in November. As described in a previous snapshot[3], this increase was especially felt in Tapachula as, on the one hand, in Mexico media coverage of the spread of COVID-19 among people on the move often conveyed the idea of migrants and refugees as vectors for the virus; and, on the other, the economic crisis caused by the pandemic increased competition between migrants and the local population for both formal and informal jobs. As for the situation in Guatemala, according to 4Mi monitors, negative media coverage of migration movements – especially with respect to the attempted caravans – contributed to an increase in hostility towards refugees and migrants among the local population.

Other effects of the crisis seem to have decreased over the months: concern and/or stress, difficulties in asylum processes and the reduced availability of basic goods were reported less frequently in the last three months of the data collection period, as countries began to adapt their COVID-19 prevention strategies and to lift restrictions (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. What other impacts has the crisis had on your day-to-day life?

Note: Respondents may select more than one answer to this question.
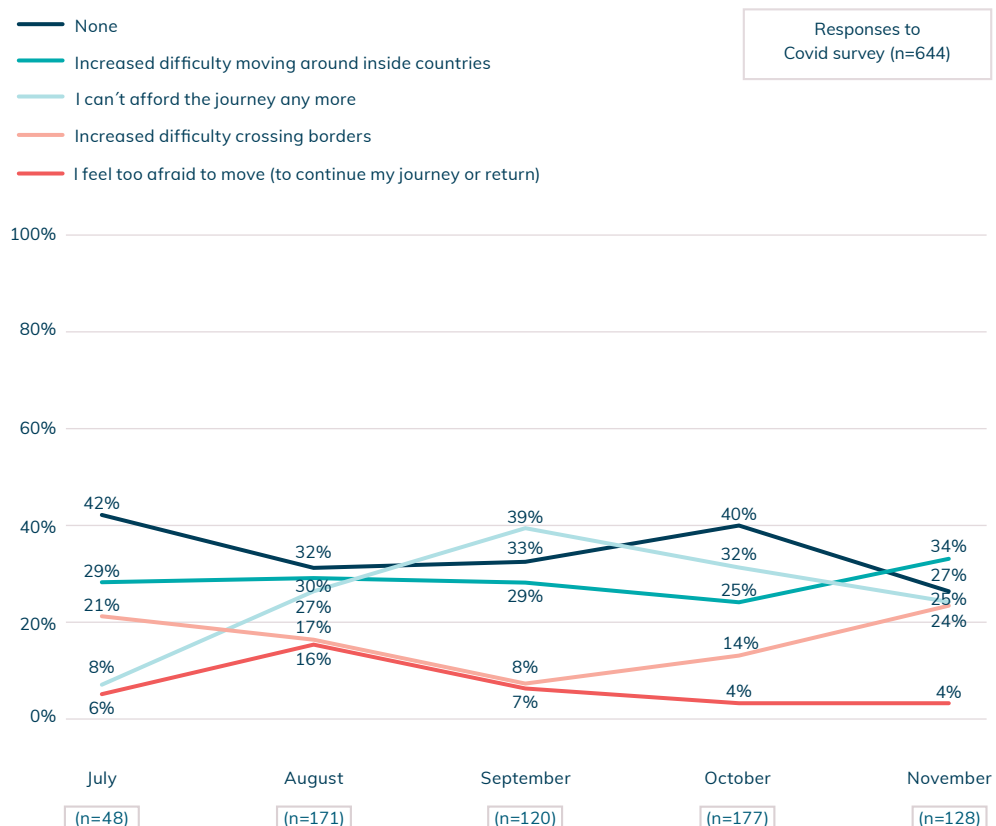Note: 4 response options were omitted with averages less than 38%.

Reduced access to work as a consequence of the pandemic, greater concern and/or stress, and perceived difficulties in the asylum process were found to be significantly more frequently reported in Mexico than in Guatemala.

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3 MMC (2020) Impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants in Guatemala and Mexico.

Mixed trends in the impact of the pandemic on journeys

When asked what impact the coronavirus crisis had on their migration journey, a considerable share of respondents stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has not influenced their migration, although this view declined over time going from 42% of answers in July to 27% in November. In contrast, the view that it is more difficult to move within countries remained relatively stable between July and October, to then increase in November (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. What impact has the coronavirus crisis had on your migration journey?

Legend:
- None
- Increased difficulty moving around inside countries
- I can't afford the journey any more
- Increased difficulty crossing borders
- I feel too afraid to move (to continue my journey or return)

Responses to
Covid survey (n=644)

	July (n=48)	August (n=171)	September (n=120)	October (n=177)	November (n=128)
None	42%	32%	33%	40%	27%
Increased difficulty moving around inside countries	29%	30%	29%	25%	34%
I can't afford the journey any more	8%	27%	39%	32%	25%
Increased difficulty crossing borders	21%	17%	8%	14%	24%
I feel too afraid to move	6%	16%	7%	4%	4%

Note: Respondents may select more than one answer to this question.
Note: 4 response options were omitted with averages less than 15%.

The trends regarding other impacts of the pandemic on migration were mixed. The portion of respondents who cannot afford the journey anymore, for instance, increased from 8% in July to 39% in September, and then went down to 25% in November. On the contrary, respondents who reported increased difficulties crossing borders decreased from 21% in July to 8% in September, but then went up again to 25% in November.

Respondents interviewed in Mexico indicated more frequently that the pandemic has increased the difficulty of movement within countries and has caused them to be unable to continue traveling. As reported by 4Mi monitors in Tapachula, several Mexican states and municipalities have imposed curfews and movement restrictions on non-essential activities. Many refugees and migrants thus remained stranded in Tapachula out of fear of detention, but also due to a lack of resources to continue their journey. Local authorities however allowed a gradual re-activation of economic activities since September until December, which gave people on the move the opportunity to work and raise some funds to pay for the next stretch of their journey.

On the other hand, significantly[4] more respondents in Guatemala perceived that the pandemic has not influenced their migration journey compared to respondents in Mexico, but they also cited greater difficulties crossing borders. Guatemala reopened its borders in September after months of closure but, since then, all foreigners trying to enter the country must show a negative COVID-19 test to be allowed in. Additionally, following the crackdown on an attempted migrant caravan by the Guatemalan government at the beginning of October, the authorities maintained a much harsher approach to immigration compared to before the pandemic – including the establishment of checkpoints near the border.

It is expected that the adverse impact of mobility caused by the pandemic among the general refugee and migrant population, including those still in transit, is higher than what our data shows, as a share of respondents in both countries had already reached the end of their journey, and were therefore not concerned by cross-border mobility restrictions.

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4   P-value: < 0,05

Growing optimism that the situation is improving

Data revealed a gradual change in the perception of the refugees and migrants interviewed, as Guatemala and Mexico went from a strict lockdown to a gradual lifting of COVID-related restrictions. When asked to describe the situation relating to COVID-19 where they live, in July most respondents (69%) stated that things were getting worse, but this opinion decreased to 29% in November. At the same time, the share of those who believed that things were getting better went from 4% of respondents in July to 42% of respondents in November.

4Mi & COVID-19

The Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (4Mi) is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps, and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements. Normally, the recruitment of respondents and interviews take place face-to-face. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face recruitment and data collection has been suspended in all countries.

MMC has responded to the COVID-19 crisis by changing the data it collects and the way it collects it. Respondents are recruited through a number of remote or third-party mechanisms; sampling is through a mixture of purposive and snowball approaches. A new survey focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants, and the surveys are administered by telephone, by the 4Mi monitors in West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Asia and Latin America. Findings derived from the surveyed sample should not be used to make inferences about the total population of refugees and migrants, as the sample is not representative. The switch to remote recruitment and data collection results in additional potential bias and risks, which cannot be completely avoided. Further measures have been put in place to check and – to the extent possible – control for bias and to protect personal data. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at www.mixedmigration.org/4mi