Kino Border Initiative
Iniciativa Kino
para la Frontera

"They didn't care if they lived in the north": The pause of land-border deportations for Mexican nationals

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction 1
2. Who was deported through Nogales prior to April 13, 2026? 3
3. After April 13th, 2026, how has deportation to Nogales changed? 3
4. Does this drop in the number of people being deported mean that less Mexicans are being detained and deported overall? 6
5. If Mexicans are no longer being deported by land, where and how are they being deported instead? 6
6. What challenges do people face being deported by plane to the south of Mexico? 7
7. Who continues to be deported through Nogales? 8
8. What is happening to non-Mexicans deported to Mexico? 10
9. Conclusion 10

1. Introduction

Effective April 13, 2026, the United States government implemented a major policy shift by halting most deportations of Mexican nationals through northern border cities like Nogales and instead transporting many people directly to southern Mexico via aerial transfers. This strategy of geographic deterrence seeks to reduce repeat unauthorized crossings by increasing the logistical, financial, and physical distance between deportees and the U.S.–Mexico border.

This report examines what that shift has meant in Nogales, Sonora. Drawing on KBI's shelter records, in-depth interviews with deported people, and publicly available government and civil society data, we trace how deportations through Nogales have dropped, who is still being deported by land, and how deportation flights to southern Mexico have expanded. We focus on the lived experience of people like Antonio, Jesús, Diego, and Vidal - long-term community members detained in Arizona or other U.S. states and then deported to places hundreds or thousands of miles from their families and homes.

[1] The Kino Border Initiative (KBI) is a binational Catholic organization that provides humanitarian aid to migrants in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico and advocates for just and humane immigration policies on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. We offer direct humanitarian assistance and holistic accompaniment and serve people removed to Nogales, Sonora, by DHS as well as individuals fleeing violence who arrive at the border to seek asylum.

Before April 13, 2026, Nogales functioned as a central reception point for deported Mexicans, particularly long-term U.S. residents. Between December 2025 and April 13, 2026, 78.5% of the people KBI accompanied after deportation through Nogales had lived in the United States for an average of 14.3 years, most in western states such as Arizona, Colorado, Utah, and Washington. For some, deportation to Nogales meant that spouses, children, and extended family could travel to see them, bringing food, clothing, their vehicles and work tools, and helping them decide whether to remain in Mexico, seek legal options, or attempt to cross again.

The new transfer policy has reconfigured this landscape. While deportations to Nogales have fallen (from 1,613 Mexicans in March to 879 in April and 237 in May) Border Patrol arrests of Mexicans in the Arizona desert have risen, and deportation flights to southern Mexico have surged. Mexicans detained while living in the United States are now almost entirely deported by plane to states such as Tabasco, Chiapas, Quintana Roo, Yucatán, and Campeche, often far from their communities of origin and from any existing support networks. In parallel, the small number of Mexicans still deported by land through Nogales are more likely to be people recently detained crossing the border.

By stranding resource-depleted and disoriented people at Mexico's southern border or in unfamiliar interior states, the policy forces them to travel the entire country if they seek to reunite with family or return to the U.S.–Mexico border. Along this route, migrants and long-term residents alike face extreme violence, transnational criminal organizations, and an expanding web of immigration enforcement. Geographic deterrence does not change the core drivers of migration, such as deep family ties in the United States or the impossibility of safely returning to a place of origin, but it does push people to evade detection, including by taking increasingly remote, hostile, and dangerous routes through desert and mountainous terrain.

At the same time, a significant population of third-country nationals continues to be deported to and through Mexico, both by bus and by plane. Many, including elderly Cuban citizens and people from Venezuela, Haiti, and Central America, are expelled into a country where they lack legal status, support networks, or work permits, and where Mexican authorities often bus them directly to southern states. KBI's ability to document their conditions is limited, but existing research points to systematic kidnapping, extortion, detention, and other severe abuses.

This report is organized around the key questions that KBI and partner communities in Nogales are asking in real time:

- Who was being deported through Nogales prior to April 13, 2026?
- Who and how many Mexicans are being deported through Nogales now?
- Does the drop in deportations through Nogales mean that fewer Mexicans are being detained and deported overall?

- If Mexicans are no longer being deported by land, where and how are they being deported instead?
- What challenges do people face being deported by plane to the south of Mexico?
- Who continues to be deported through Nogales?
- What is happening to non-Mexicans deported to Mexico?

By connecting these questions to concrete data and testimonies from Nogales, we aim to show how a seemingly technical change in deportation logistics has profound consequences for family unity, human safety, and the rights of long-term U.S. community members and other migrants.

2. Who was deported through Nogales prior to April 13, 2026?

From December 2025 to April 13, 2026, the majority (78.5%) of people who spoke with KBI after being deported through Nogales were long-term U.S. residents, with an average of 14.3 years in the United States. Most had been living in western states, most commonly Arizona, Colorado, Utah, and Washington. For some, being deported to Nogales meant that family members could visit them, bringing food, clothing, their vehicles, and work tools.

> **Antonio*** had lived in the United States for more than 15 years. One day, local police pulled him over, allegedly for an issue with his car's tail light, and quickly contacted ICE. After ICE deported him, Antonio chose to remain in Nogales so his family could visit. He looked forward to his children's spring break so they would be able to come see him there.

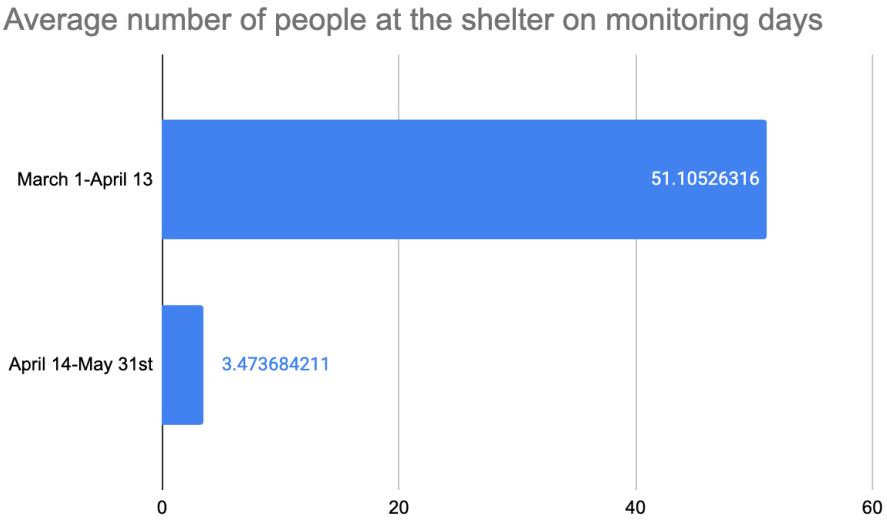
This kind of family connection can make an enormous difference. Among those deported from inside the United States, 51% reported being separated from U.S. citizen family members by deportation. By contrast, around 21.5% of those deported through Nogales prior to April 13 were people whom Border Patrol had detained while crossing through the desert, usually in Arizona.
In March 2026, 1,613 Mexicans were deported by bus through Nogales's DeConcini Port of Entry. In April 2026, that number fell to 879.

3. After April 13th, 2026, how has deportation to Nogales changed?

In May 2026, the Mexican consulate reported that the United States deported 237 Mexican nationals to Nogales, down from 879 in April and 1,613 in March. According to the Mexican consulate in Nogales, AZ, most of those deported in May were originally from Sonora and

Sinaloa and had been detained in or near Nogales, Arizona.[2] Yet at the government shelter where KBI monitors arrivals, we encountered only 15 Mexicans over the entire month of May, many of whom were waiting for Mexican authorities to arrange transportation back to their home states.

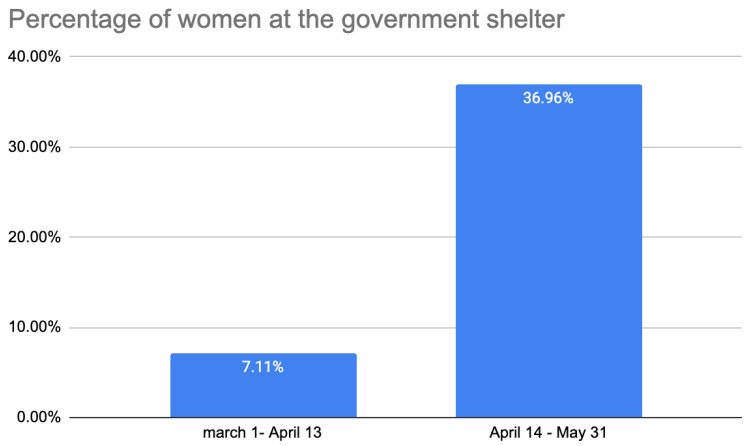
These numbers indicate that land-based deportations of Mexicans through Nogales have been dramatically reduced since mid-April, even as overall enforcement continues. Based on the combined consular and shelter data, there is effectively a pause in most land deportations of Mexican nationals at the U.S.–Mexico border beginning the week of April 13, 2026.



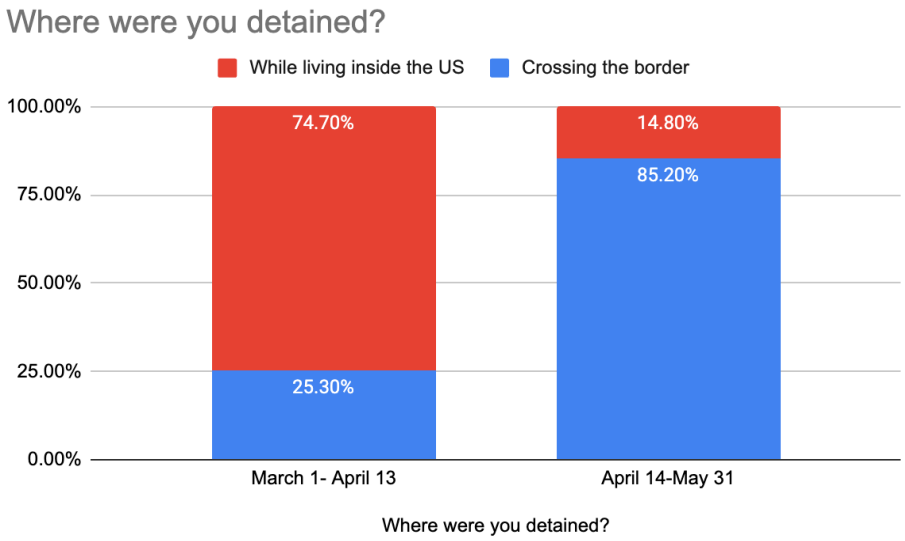
Jesus* lived for more than 25 years in Arizona. One day in February, ICE agents followed him home and detained him. After several days in detention, the government deported him by land to Nogales. Jesus then decided to travel back to his home state. But, soon, hoping to be reunited with his family, he decided to cross again. This time Border Patrol agents detained him in the desert. They imprisoned him for more than two months in a cramped cell. Eventually the officials told him and the other detainees that the land border was closed and they would be flown south. He said they didn't care if they lived in the north. People from across Mexico were put on the plane to southern Mexico. The US government then sent **two planes full of deportees including Jesus from the north and south of Mexico to Quintana Roo, a state in southern Mexico**.

[2] This interpretation is further supported by the fact that, across March and April, there was a consistent discrepancy of approximately 100 to 200 people between the estimated number of deportees at the government shelter and the total number deported, as reported by the consulate. This pattern suggests that the policy governing people detained in Nogales itself—likely those processed locally rather than sent to detention centers—has remained relatively unchanged despite the broader halt in land-based deportations. Many of these individuals appear to be from Sonora and Sinaloa, which may help explain why this subset continues to be deported through Nogales by land.

It is not only the number of people being deported through Nogales that has changed, but also the demographic profile of those still arriving there. As noted in the previous section, before April 13 the majority of people at the government shelter were long-term U.S. residents deported from the interior of the United States, and the overwhelming majority were men. The recent shift



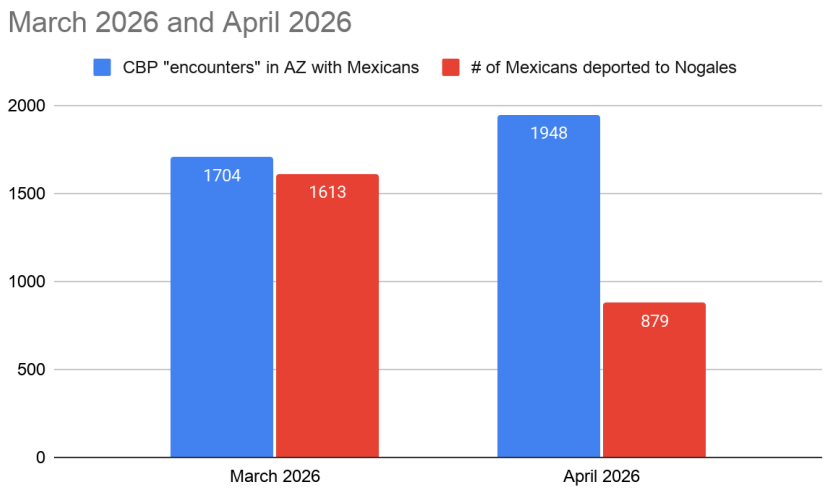
therefore suggests not simply a reduction in land deportations, but a meaningful change in who is being deported through Nogales, as the next two charts show.



4. Does this drop in the number of people being deported mean that less Mexicans are being detained and deported overall?

The decline in deportations of Mexicans through Nogales does not indicate a decrease in overall detentions or deportations. While deportations through Nogales fell from 1,613 in March to 879 in April, Border Patrol arrests of individuals crossing through the desert actually increased, rising from 1,704 in March to 1,948 in April.

Data on ICE arrests for these months are not yet public, but there is no indication that they have decreased significantly, particularly given the sharp rise in deportation flights, which function as



an alternative to land-based deportations (see next section). Rather than reducing enforcement, the policy appears to be relocating it: shifting deportations away from land returns through Nogales and toward aerial transfers to southern Mexico as part of a broader strategy of geographic deterrence.

5. If Mexicans are no longer being deported by land, where and how are they being deported instead?

The sharp decline in land deportations through Nogales coincides with the surge in deportation flights from the United States to southern Mexico. According to Human Rights First's ICE Flight Monitor, ICE removal flights to Mexico increased to an average of 23 per week in April 2026, up from five per week between January and March. These April flights were all destined for Villahermosa, Tabasco, or Tapachula, Chiapas, both in southern Mexico. This pattern aligns with what recently deported people traveling north through Nogales have reported about where their planes landed.

For 2025, a previous ICE Flight Monitor report documented flights primarily destined for Mexico City. This no longer appears to be the case, pushing people even farther south than in 2025. On May 1, local news reported that more than 300 people were deported on two flights to Quintana

Roo, marking the first removal flights to that state tracked by ICE Flight Monitor. On June 3, local outlets in Mérida, Yucatán reported the arrival of the first deportation flight directly from the United States. On June 5, more than 170 Mexicans were deported from El Paso to Campeche, another state bordering Guatemala, likely among the first deportation flights to that state as well.

The flight patterns from the United States have also changed. Previously, deportation flights to Mexico departed almost exclusively from San Diego and Harlingen, Texas, with a small number leaving from El Paso. Since April 13, however, flights have departed from locations across the country, including Dallas and Houston, Texas; Jacksonville, Florida; Victorville, California; Alexandria, Louisiana; and Phoenix, Arizona. Flights leaving from Phoenix likely include people detained crossing the border in Arizona who, prior to this policy shift, would have been deported by land through Nogales.

6. What challenges do people face being deported by plane to the south of Mexico?

When people are deported to southern rather than northern Mexico, they are pushed much farther away from their families, particularly those who had been living in the western United States. This distance deepens family separation and cuts people off from the emotional, financial, and practical support that relatives might otherwise be able to provide. In addition to the pain of separation, people who hope to reunite with their families or attempt to return to the United States face substantial financial and logistical burdens, since they must now travel the length of Mexico to reach the border again.

These challenges are compounded by Mexico's expanding immigration enforcement apparatus, which adds checkpoints, detentions, and bureaucratic barriers along the route north. The southern cities where deportation flights commonly arrive (especially Tapachula in Chiapas and Villahermosa in Tabasco) are also dangerous for migrants. Tapachula, near the border with Guatemala, is a well-known site where organized crime frequently targets and extorts migrants, while Villahermosa has similarly experienced high levels of violence. Being dropped into these regions without support or protection exposes people to heightened risks of kidnapping, extortion, and other abuses.

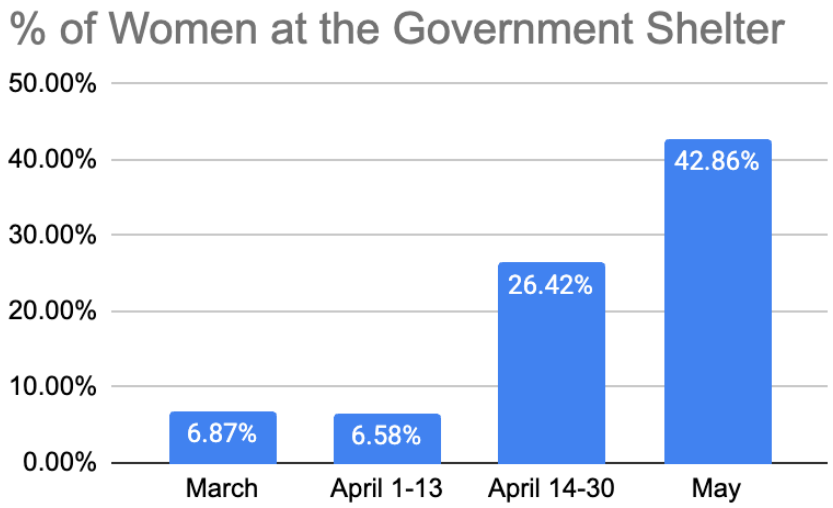
Diego* lived in California for 28 years with his wife and three children, now ages 19, 14, and 9, all U.S. citizens. He worked installing fire sprinklers and as a plumber. Last year, ICE detained Diego and several of his co-workers. In detention, he was given cold mashed potatoes, sometimes still with dirt in them, and a single cup of water, and officials held him for more than a year while repeatedly postponing his court date. When they finally deported him, they flew him directly to Tabasco, in southern Mexico. From there, Diego traveled to Veracruz, his state of origin, but after more than 20 years away he no longer had any family there. The

flights from California were too expensive for his children to visit him, leaving him completely isolated. Desperate to be closer to his children and the only family he had left, he headed north again to Nogales, where he hopes to resettle.

7. Who continues to be deported through Nogales?

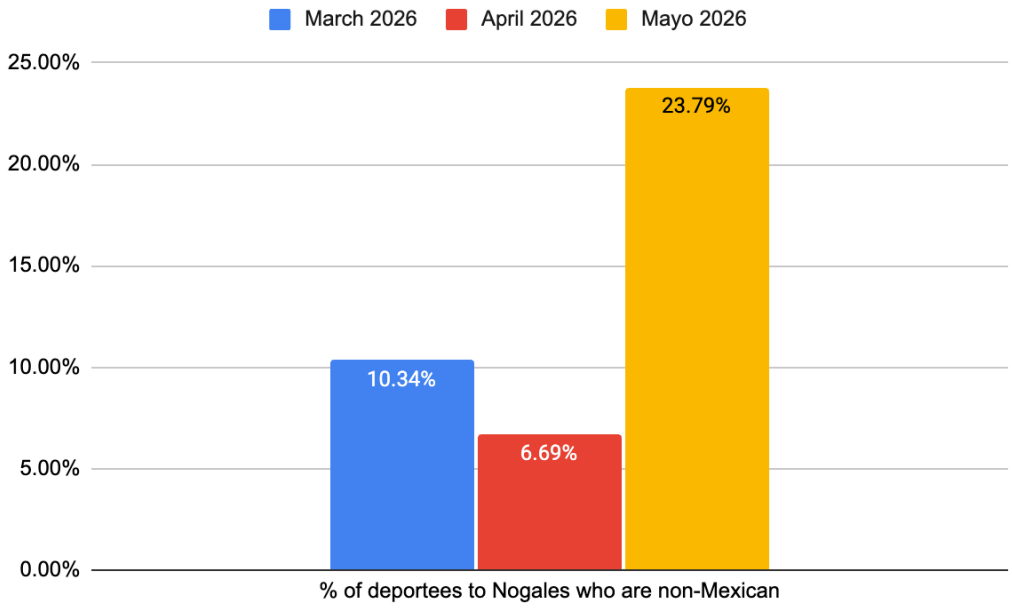
A small number of Mexicans continue to be deported through Nogales by land. Based on KBI's monitoring visits to the government shelter, in May we recorded 15 Mexicans whom the United States deported to Nogales, and 80% of them had been detained by Border Patrol while crossing the border. In previous months, only about 20% of those deported through Nogales had been detained crossing the desert, with the rest detained while living inside the United States. This shift suggests that, among Mexicans, those still deported through Nogales are now more likely to be people recently detained at the border.

The profile of this group has also changed in ways that point to increased vulnerability. People deported between April 13 and May 31 reported an average detention period of 13 days (about two weeks), compared to 58 days (about two months) for those deported between March 1 and April 12. Of the 15 Mexicans recorded in May, 42% were women; by contrast, in April prior to the 13th, only 7% of those at the government shelter were women. The proportion of children at the shelter has also risen compared to previous months. Taken together, these shifts indicate that the select few Mexicans still being deported by land through Nogales are more likely to be women, children, and others in more vulnerable situations.



Likewise, Non-Mexican nationals, especially Cubans, also continue to be deported through Nogales. In fact, non-Mexicans now make up a much larger share of those deported through

Nogales than in previous months, even as the overall number of people deported there has fallen.



8. What is happening to non-Mexicans deported to Mexico?

Non-Mexican nationals, the majority of whom are Cubans, continue to be deported through Nogales. Non-Mexicans now make up a much higher percentage of those deported through Nogales than in previous months. In March and April, non-Mexicans represented just 10% and 7% of those deported to Nogales. In May, they accounted for 25%, and of those non-Mexicans, 83% were Cubans.

Because Mexican immigration authorities immediately bus Cubans and other non-Mexicans south to Chiapas and Tabasco, KBI cannot directly document their conditions after arrival. However, Human Rights Watch has recently reported on the experiences of non-Mexicans deported to Mexico, including prolonged detention, extortion, and serious abuses faced by people returned to these southern states.

9. Conclusion

The evidence presented in this report indicates that the sharp decline in deportations of Mexican nationals through Nogales since April 13, 2026 does not reflect a reduction in detention or

deportation overall. Rather, it reflects a reorganization of deportation practices: people are not being deported by land to northern border cities, instead being flown to southern Mexico. This shift has changed not only the number of people arriving in Nogales, but also who arrives there, with those still deported by land more likely to be people detained while crossing the border and, increasingly, women and children.

For long-term U.S. residents, this policy has especially severe consequences. Deportation to southern Mexico places people far from their families, communities, and support networks, often in dangerous regions where they face extortion, violence, and profound uncertainty. Instead of addressing the reasons people seek to return to the United States (especially family unity and long-established ties) this model of geographic deterrence imposes additional hardship while pushing people into longer, riskier, and more dehumanizing journeys north.

At the same time, non-Mexican nationals continue to be deported into Mexico and rapidly transferred south, often without legal status, support networks, or adequate protection. Taken together, these patterns show the serious humanitarian consequences for Mexican and non-Mexican deportees alike.

**Names changed to protect privacy.*