

## Addressing Food Insecurity Among Central American Migrants in Mexico

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### Executive Summary

Central American migrants living in Mexico City face unique challenges that contribute to heightened food insecurity, with issues stemming from incomplete documentation, social isolation, and precarious legal status. This brief examines these barriers and how they exacerbate food insecurity among migrant populations who reside in Mexico's urban areas, particularly those from the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador). Migrants face bureaucratic, social, and economic obstacles that limit their access to food, housing, and employment. The brief recommends policy changes aimed at improving documentation processes, enhancing social support networks, and addressing migrants' specific food security needs.



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### Introduction

Mexico City has long been a destination and transit hub for migrants from Central America, particularly those from the Northern Triangle. Historically, the majority of these migrants viewed Mexico as a transit country, hoping to reach the United States. However, in recent years, an increasing number of migrants have chosen, or been forced, to settle permanently in Mexico due to tightened U.S. border restrictions, violence in their home countries, and the challenges of the migration process. This shift has placed pressure on Mexico City, where migrants face severe challenges to their livelihoods, including food insecurity. Many of these migrants remain undocumented or have incomplete documentation, which limits their ability to secure stable jobs, access healthcare, or receive social assistance. In addition, their social isolation—caused by a lack of established migrant communities and weak social networks—exacerbates their vulnerability. Migrants living in Mexico City face the dual challenge of navigating life as undocumented or precariously documented individuals while struggling to access sufficient, nutritious food for themselves and their families.

This brief identifies the main obstacles faced by Central American migrants in Mexico City, particularly the role of incomplete documentation, isolation, and the urban context in shaping their food insecurity. It also proposes recommendations to mitigate these challenges and improve their food security and well-being.

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## Key Challenges

### 1. Incomplete Documentation and Limited Access to Services

One of the most significant challenges faced by Central American migrants in Mexico City is incomplete documentation. Many migrants do not possess valid residency permits or identification documents, which limits their access to government services, including healthcare and social protection programs. Even migrants who are eligible for certain programs may struggle to navigate the bureaucratic processes required to obtain documentation, leaving them in a state of legal limbo.

Without valid documentation, migrants are also restricted in their ability to work in the formal economy, which severely limits their income. Many are forced to rely on informal jobs, which are often low-paying, exploitative, and unstable. This precarious employment situation makes it difficult for migrants to afford sufficient food, and it increases their vulnerability to food insecurity. Migrants also face difficulties accessing public services, such as garbage collection, which directly affects their living conditions and, by extension, their ability to store, prepare, and consume food.

In Mexico City, incomplete documentation is a widespread issue among the Central American migrant population. Many households report that their documentation status prevented them from securing jobs, enrolling their children in school, or accessing healthcare. For example, one young mother, Ame, could not register her child in daycare because she lacked a valid birth certificate, leaving her unable to work. This inability to access critical services directly impacts their ability to feed themselves and their families adequately.

### 2. Social Isolation and Lack of Support Networks

Unlike other migrant communities in Mexico City, such as the Korean or Chinese populations, Central American migrants have not established well-defined geographical clusters or neighbourhoods. This lack of community creates social isolation, which further exacerbates their vulnerability. Migrants who lack social networks are less likely to access informal support systems, such as food sharing or financial assistance from friends or family members, that could help them cope with food insecurity.

This isolation is compounded by the fact that many migrants actively conceal their identity to avoid detection by authorities. Migrants often change their speech patterns, clothing, or mannerisms to blend in and avoid drawing attention to their non-Mexican status. While this strategy may provide some protection from law enforcement, it also reinforces their social isolation and limits their ability to form supportive networks. The absence of community-based support structures means that migrants have few people to rely on in times of need, particularly when they face food shortages or other crises.

Social isolation also affects migrants' mental health, which in turn influences their ability to manage food insecurity. The psychological toll of living in constant fear of deportation, combined with the stress of navigating a foreign city with limited support, takes a significant toll on migrants. Social isolation also affects migrants' mental health, which in turn influences their ability to manage food insecurity. The psychological toll of living in constant fear of deportation, combined with the stress of navigating a foreign city with limited support, takes a significant toll on migrants' capacity to seek and access help. Many migrants report feeling trapped and overwhelmed, which can negatively impact their food choices, reduce meal frequencies, and lead to reliance on low-quality or unhealthy food options that are readily available.

Several migrants mentioned the isolation they felt upon arriving in Mexico City. For instance, Alma, a mother of two, spoke of feeling utterly alone without the social networks that had supported her back home in Honduras. In the absence of close family or friends, many migrants must turn to shelters and NGOs to help meet their basic food needs. However, shelters are often overwhelmed and under-resourced, leaving many migrants with inconsistent access to food and essential services.

### 3. Economic Constraints and Employment Challenges

Migrants in Mexico City, particularly those without legal documentation, are often confined to low-wage and unstable employment in the informal sector. Without the ability to obtain formal work permits, many migrants take jobs in construction, domestic work, or street vending, where wages are low, and employment is irregular. This economic insecurity leaves migrants particularly vulnerable to food insecurity, as their income is often insufficient to cover the rising costs of food, rent, and other basic necessities.

Many migrant households can only afford to eat two meals per day, with several participants reporting that they sometimes had to skip meals altogether to ensure their children had enough to eat. The high cost of living in Mexico City further exacerbates the problem, as many migrant households are forced to prioritize rent and other living expenses over food, leaving them with little disposable income to purchase nutritious food. For example, Brandon, a construction worker, described having to cut down on his meals when work was scarce, eating only rice and beans to stretch his budget.

Additionally, the lack of affordable childcare prevents many migrant mothers from entering the workforce, further limiting household income and increasing food insecurity. Ame's story is illustrative of this problem: unable to enroll her child in daycare due to incomplete documentation, she has been unable to find steady work, leaving her entirely dependent on the support of a former teacher.

#### **4. Access to Nutritious and Culturally Preferred Foods**

Food security is not just about having enough food; it is also about having access to safe, nutritious, and culturally acceptable food. Many Central American migrants in Mexico City report feeling estranged from the local food culture, which can affect their dietary habits and overall well-being.

Many migrant families relied heavily on basic staples such as rice, beans, and tortillas, with limited access to fresh fruits, vegetables, and protein-rich foods. While these foods provide sustenance, they do not meet the nutritional needs of growing children or adults engaged in physically demanding labour. Cultural estrangement from food is a recurring theme. For example, migrants miss the foods they ate back home, such as pupusas or tamales, and found it difficult to access or afford the ingredients needed to prepare these dishes in Mexico City. This disconnection from their traditional diets not only affects their nutritional intake but also contributes to feelings of homesickness and alienation.

Migrants also face challenges in accessing food markets. Many live in neighborhoods far from affordable grocery stores or wet markets, and with limited public transportation and tight budgets, they often must rely on convenience stores or street vendors, where food choices are less nutritious and more expensive. Without access to affordable, healthy food options, many migrants are forced to compromise on the quality and diversity of their diets, further exacerbating their food insecurity.

## **Recommendations**

### **1. Improve Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food**

Policymakers must focus on improving access to affordable and nutritious food for migrants living in urban areas like Mexico City. One approach is to expand food distribution networks to underserved neighborhoods where migrant populations are concentrated. This could include mobile food markets, food vouchers, or subsidies for low-income families, allowing them to purchase healthy and culturally preferred foods. Additionally, programs that promote urban agriculture and community gardening could be introduced to provide migrants with access to fresh produce. Such initiatives would help mitigate food insecurity while fostering a sense of community among isolated migrant populations.

### **2. Strengthen Social Support Networks**

Building stronger social support networks is crucial for reducing isolation and improving food security among migrants. Community centers or migrant-led organizations could offer spaces where migrants can share resources, access social services, and form connections with others in similar situations. These organizations could also facilitate food-sharing programs or collective kitchens, where migrants can prepare and share meals. Migrants often rely heavily on shelters and NGOs for food and social support, but these organizations are frequently under-resourced. Increasing funding for shelters and social services specifically tailored to migrant populations would ensure that migrants have consistent access to food, housing, and emotional support during times of crisis.

### **3. Facilitate Legal Documentation and Access to Services**

To address the root causes of migrant vulnerability, the Mexican government should streamline the process of obtaining legal documentation for Central American migrants. By simplifying the bureaucracy around residency permits and work authorizations, migrants would have greater access to formal employment, healthcare, and social protection programs. Legal documentation is key to improving food security, as it opens doors to stable jobs, government assistance, and public services. Providing migrants with the tools they need to secure formal legal status would help lift them out of the informal economy, increasing their income and reducing their reliance on emergency food aid.

## 4. Address the Needs of Migrant Mothers and Children

Specific interventions should be implemented to address the needs of migrant mothers and children, who are among the most vulnerable to food insecurity. Expanding access to affordable childcare would enable more migrant women to enter the workforce and contribute to household income, reducing the risk of food insecurity. Additionally, school meal programs and nutritional support for children should be made available to migrant families, ensuring that children have access to the nutritious food they need for healthy development.

## Conclusion

Central American migrants in Mexico City face a range of challenges that contribute to their food insecurity, including incomplete documentation, social isolation, and limited access to employment and social services. These barriers not only affect their ability to earn a stable income but also limit their access to sufficient, nutritious food. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that includes improving access to affordable food, strengthening social support networks, facilitating legal documentation, and providing targeted support for migrant mothers and children. By implementing these recommendations, policymakers can help reduce food insecurity among migrant populations in Mexico City and improve their overall well-being. A more inclusive approach to food security will ensure that all residents, regardless of their legal status or background, can lead healthy and dignified lives.

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