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# Nicaraguan migration: Myths and reality

John Perry



A night scene at a border crossing. In the foreground, a man in a red shirt stands on a concrete ledge. In the background, a sign reads "NICARAGUA AMA LA PAZ". The scene is illuminated by warm lights from a building on the right and streetlights in the distance. Palm trees and other structures are visible in the background.

## Have one in ten people fled the country? – the truth about Nicaraguan migration

- What the opposition sources claim
- Global figures for displaced Nicaraguans
- Migration to **Costa Rica**
- Migration to the **United States**
- Reasons for migrating
- “Humanitarian parole”
- The journey north
- Nicaragua as a transit country
- Myth or reality?



# What opposition sources claim

Eyder Peralta, reporting on NPR's [The Sunday Story](#) on September 10

- 600,000 people – almost one in ten – have fled Nicaragua in the because of “constant turmoil” in a country where “politics has taken over every aspect of life.”
- The crucial date, after which Nicaraguans began to “flee”, is mid-2018, when a violent coup attempt led to the deaths of more than 200 people.





# Where do the figures come from?

**MEDIALOGUE**  
Leadership for the Americas

**Manuel Orozco in *The Dialogue*:**

- Nicaraguan migration from 2019-2022 totaled 590,518

**Nicaraguan “human rights collective” based in Costa Rica, *Nunca Mas*:**

- 605,043 have been “forcibly displaced”

**Both are opposition sources.**

**The Political Situation in  
Nicaragua and International  
Migration from the Crisis**

Manuel Orozco



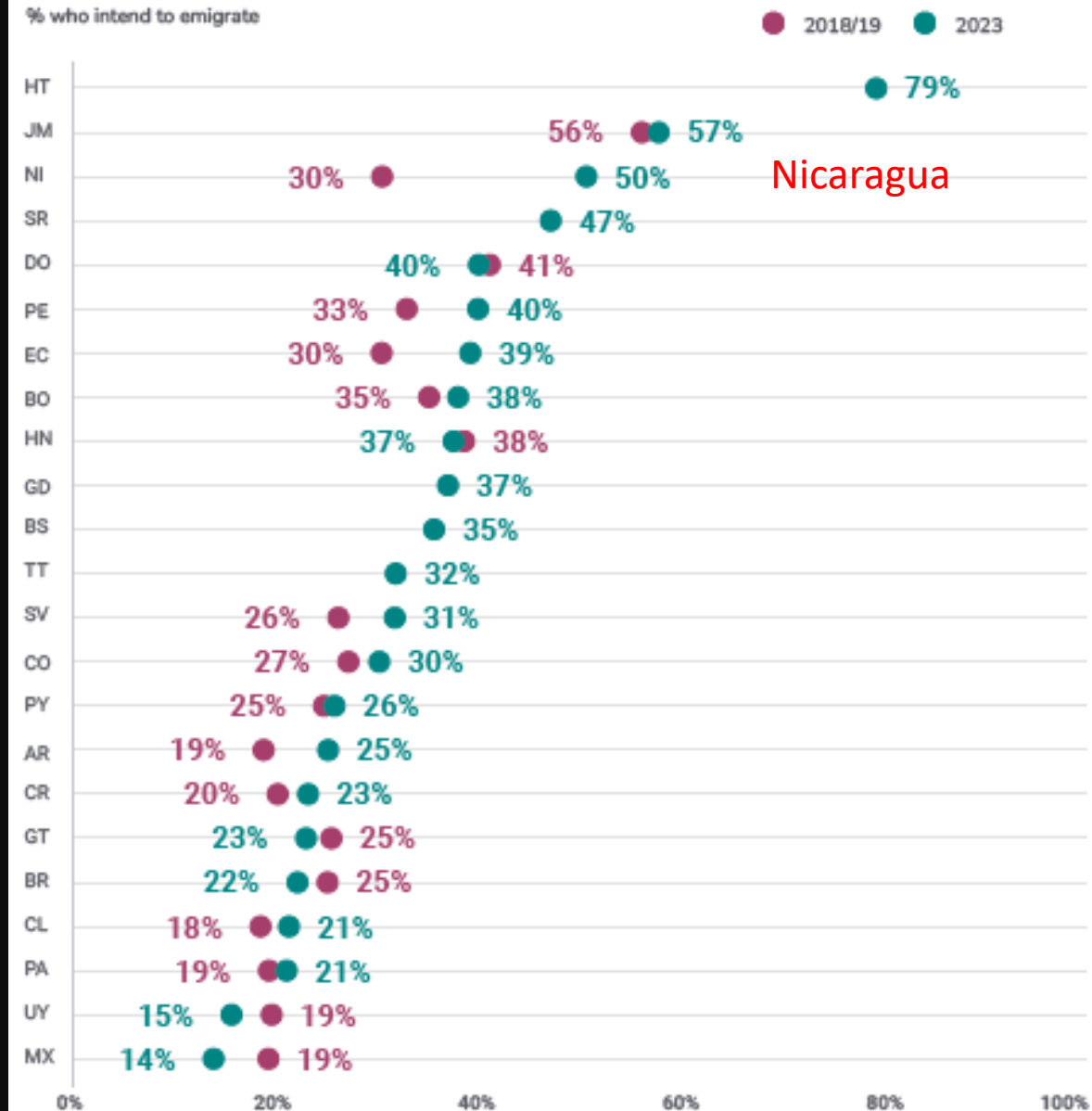
# Recent survey: 50% of Nicaraguans “plan to migrate”

“Do you have intentions to go live or work in another country in the next three years?”

- Supposedly 50% of Nicaraguans have such intentions compared with 30% in 2018
- But within three years of 2018, fewer than 5% of Nicaraguans migrated
- Survey based on a sample of only a few 100 Nicaraguans, contacted by cell phone
- Ignores regular, temporary migration to Costa Rica
- If the survey were true , it would mean 210m Latin Americans migrating within 3 years Equivalent to two-thirds of the US population

<https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2023/11/29/support-for-democracy-in-the-americas-remains-low-opening-door-for-politicians-with-undemocratic-plans-vanderbilt-survey-finds/>

Emigration intentions have increased since 2018/19 in most LAC countries



Source: LAPOP Lab, AmericasBarometer 2018-2023



## Background: Nicaraguans have always migrated

- 1.1 million people (out of 6.6m) have migrated at some stage, half before 2018
- Officially 385,000 Nicaraguans live in Costa Rica, unofficially half a million
- Some migrate permanently, many more temporarily, to work
- **But, 1 in 10...?**





## Global figures for 'displaced' Nicaraguans

- UN refugee agency - 293,808 – three-quarters in Costa Rica, rest in US (38,000) and elsewhere
- UN 'Global Trends' figures are higher – over 275,000 claims just in 2021 & 2022
- Earlier article for COHA showed double counting – admitted to by the UN

<https://coha.org/the-un-refugee-agency-is-exaggerating-the-number-of-nicaraguan-refugees>



# Claiming asylum in Costa Rica

- No agreement on figures – but about 200,000 claims since 2018
- But how many are genuine claims?
- Only a few thousand approved
- CR gov't says only 80% are valid – most are economic migrants
- Previous CR government pleaded with Nicaraguans to stay during the pandemic
- President Chaves has put restrictions on applications, arguing most are economic migrants



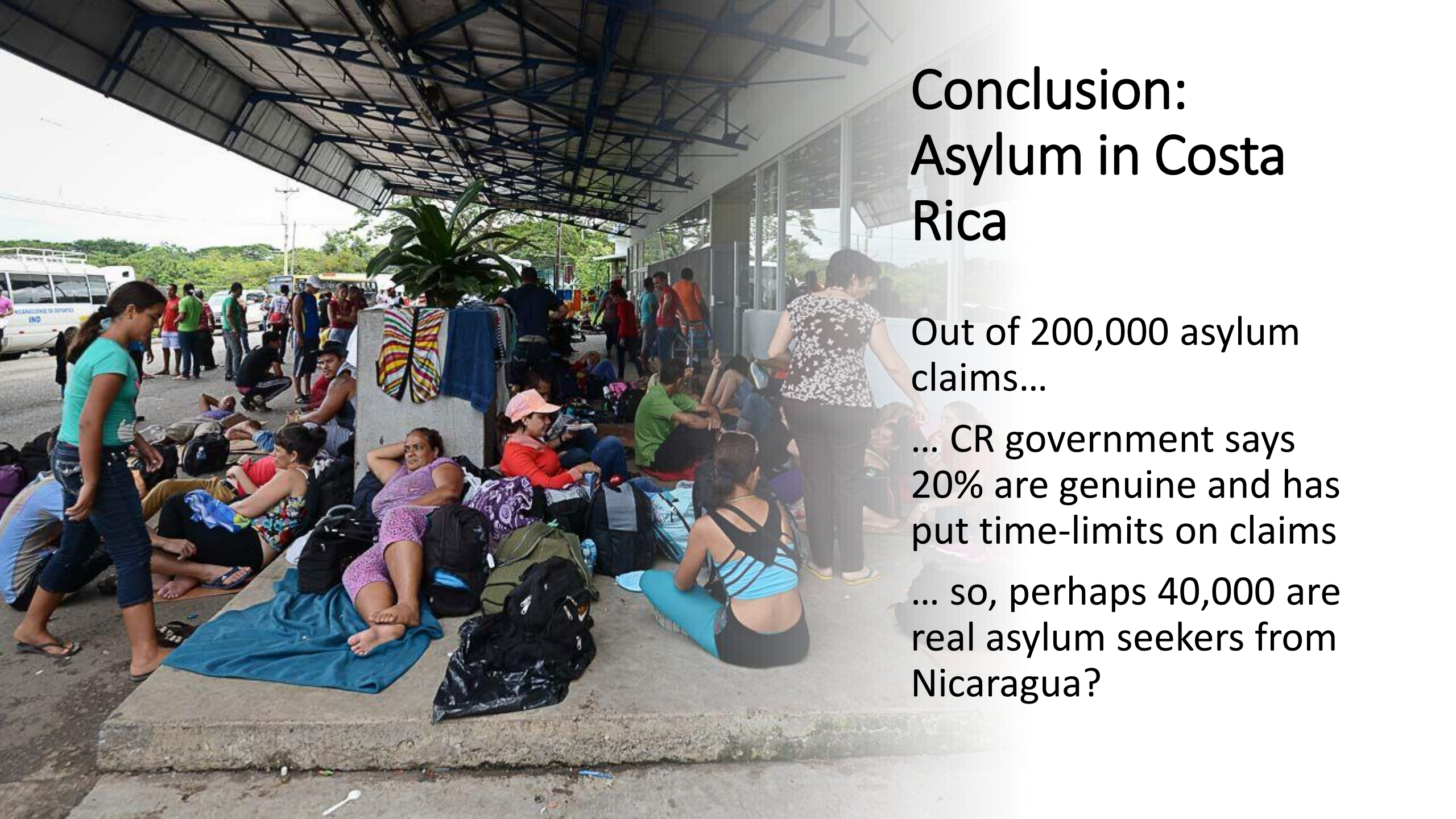


# Nicaragua & Costa Rica – mutual dependency

- Key role in CR economy  
<https://www.cetcam.org/el-aporte-de-los-nicaraguenses-a-costa-rica/>
- In 2022 the countries signed an agreement about Nicaraguan migrant workers – low-paid jobs (Costa Rica is the most unequal country in Latin America)
- Cross border movement: last 12 months, 294,283 Nicaraguans in, 296,119 out
- Nicaragua's 2019 amnesty, for those who committed crimes in 2018, allowed unknown numbers to return from CR
- Now many are instead leaving for the US.







# Conclusion: Asylum in Costa Rica

Out of 200,000 asylum  
claims...

... CR government says  
20% are genuine and has  
put time-limits on claims

... so, perhaps 40,000 are  
real asylum seekers from  
Nicaragua?



# Migrating to the United States

- Until 2021, there was very little Nicaraguan migration
- According to the US census, the Nicaraguan-born population in the US was steady or declining
- This changed abruptly – in July 2021, 13,000 Nicas were apprehended at the border
- Since then, until August 2023 some 350,317 ‘encounters’ took place
- But numbers of Nicaraguans encountered in 2023 are well below those of 2022
- Half of encounters in FY2023 are still from Mexico or the Northern Triangle



## 'Encounters' at the US border in FY2023

	Total Number of Encounters	Share of Total Encounters by Nationality (%)	Share of Encounters by Nationality Occurring at Ports of Entry (%)
All Countries	2,476,000	100	17
Mexico	717,000	29	19
Venezuela	266,000	11	25
Guatemala	220,000	9	3
Honduras	214,000	9	15
Colombia	160,000	6	3
Cuba	142,000	6	18
Ecuador	116,000	5	2
Nicaragua	99,000	4	2
Haiti	76,000	3	99
Peru	76,000	3	1
Other	389,000	16	19

Source: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/border-numbers-fy2023>

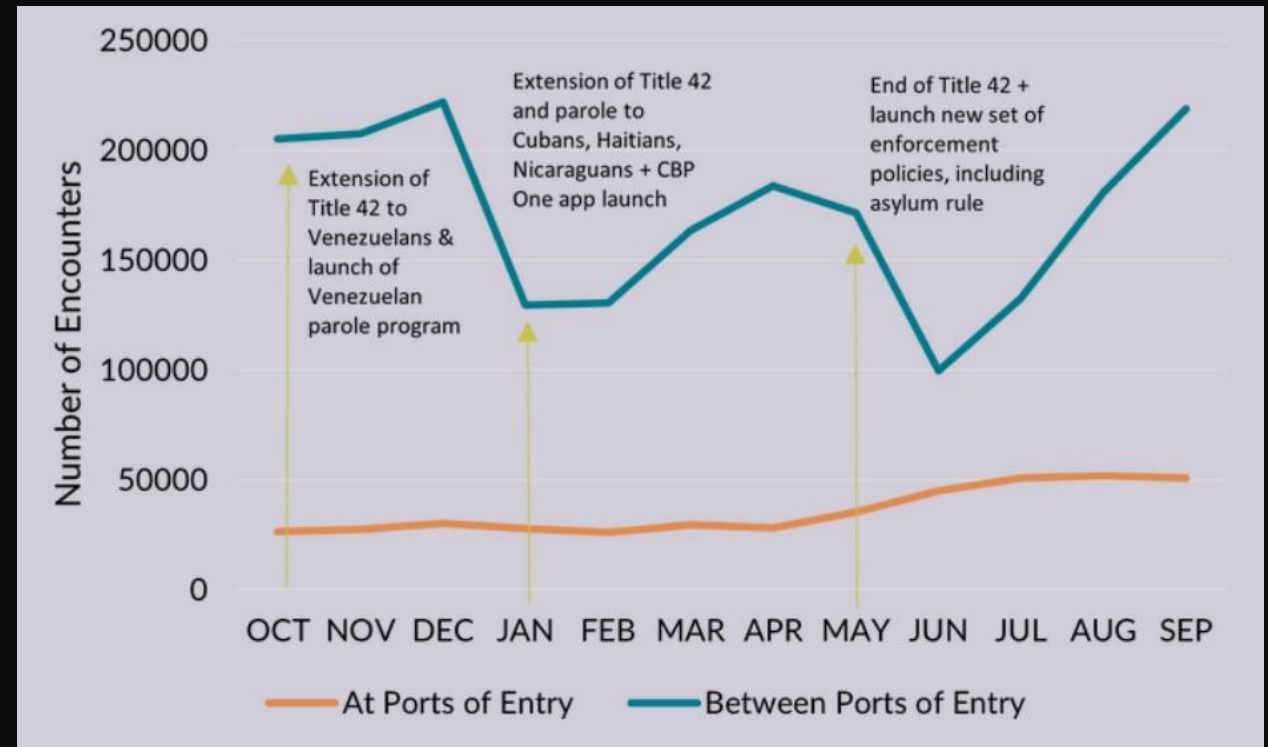


# Changes in border policy affect migrant trends

## Changes in the Fiscal Year Oct 22 - Sept 23

- Until January 2023, Nicaraguans treated under Title 8 and allowed into the US
- After January 2023, dealt with under Title 42 like other Central Americans and subject to expulsion
- But 'humanitarian parole' introduced at the same time

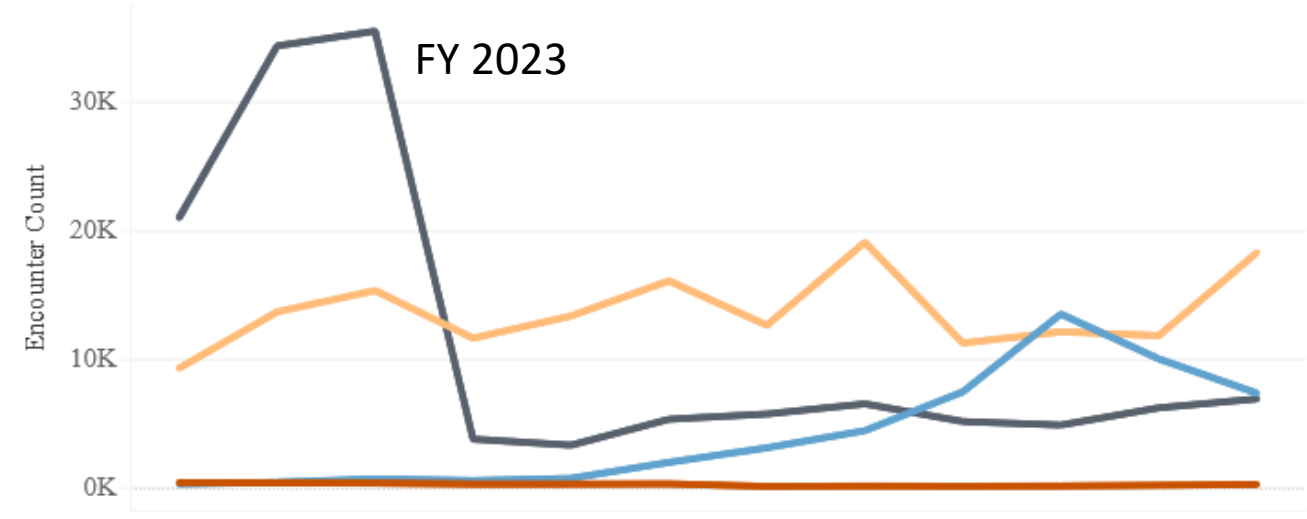
[Chart shows all border encounters, not just Nicaraguans]





Border encounters with Nicaraguans since 2020

FY Nationwide Encounters by Month

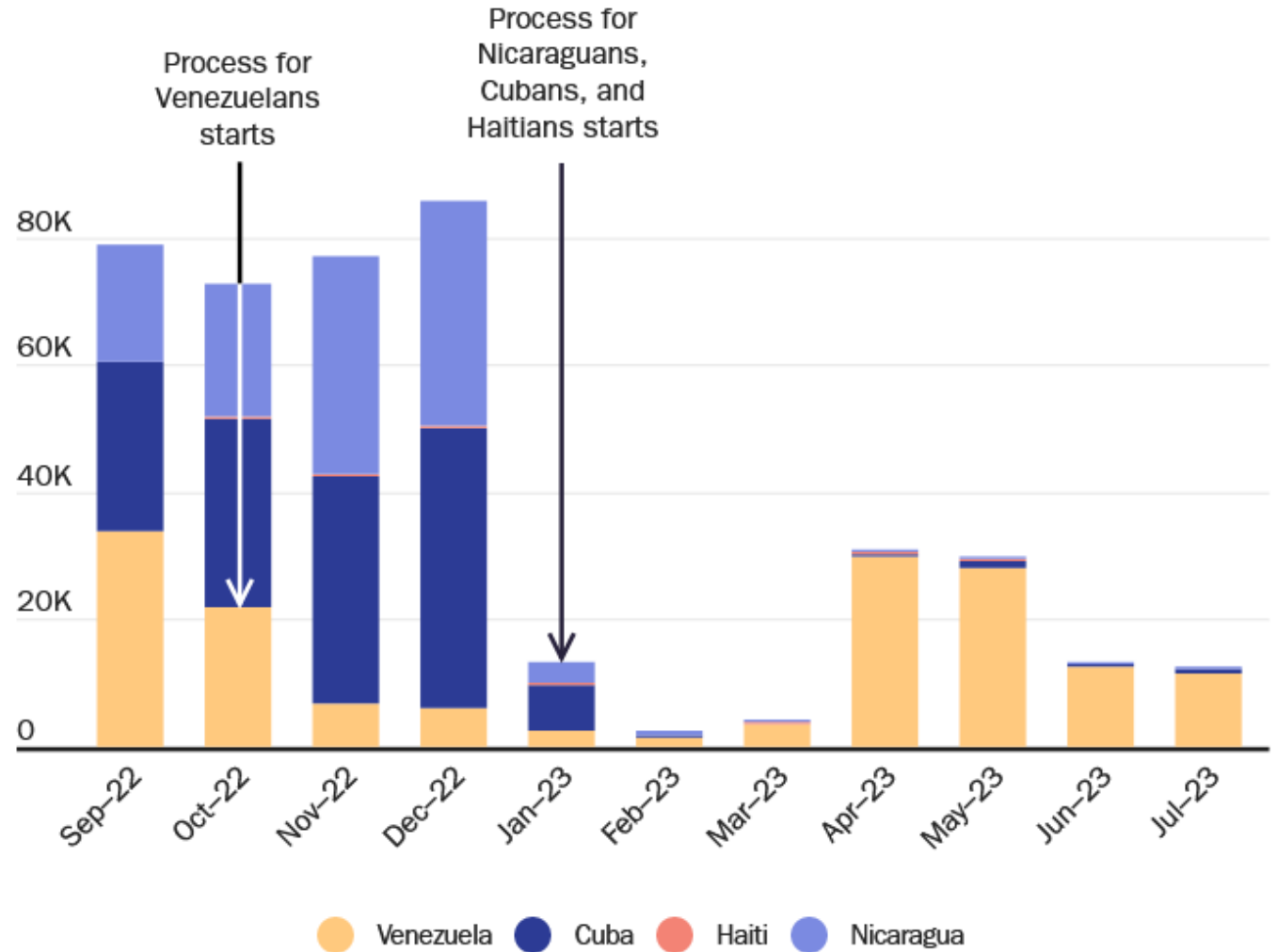


	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	Total
2023	20,990	34,333	35,481	3,795	3,321	5,337	5,747	6,535	5,159	4,887	6,224	6,920	<b>138,729</b>
2022	9,299	13,678	15,336	11,636	13,356	16,085	12,633	19,088	11,253	12,128	11,832	18,276	<b>164,600</b>
2021	314	446	708	575	748	1,990	3,120	4,451	7,472	13,509	10,024	7,365	<b>50,722</b>
2020	427	396	379	301	303	320	120	149	134	153	211	271	<b>3,164</b>



Was this because of Title 42 or because of 'humanitarian parole'?

Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans arrested crossing illegally, September 2022–July 2023



# ‘Migrant encounters’ – what are they?

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- Expulsions: to home country or country of transit.
  - Apprehensions: detained in the US, at least temporarily.
  - Nicaraguans receive better treatment than others, so probably most of those “encountered” were admitted.
  - Many then claim asylum, few are granted it (2,395 Nicaraguans in 2022, a record year).
  - Some 10,000 Nicaraguans have been deported – much lower numbers than for rest of C America
  - Unknown numbers return of own accord
- 







The reasons? –  
repression?  
communism?

- State Department, 2021: "What we are seeing in Nicaragua is an escalating climate of repression, fear and hopelessness"
- Reuters and the Wall Street Journal described a government "crackdown" stirring a "fast-growing exodus" from the country.
- BBC: "They'd rather die than return to Nicaragua"
- White House spokesperson, September 2022: Nicaraguans are "fleeing political persecution and communism."
- Manuel Orozco, a Nicaraguan based in Washington, told The Hill that "Nicaragua's dictatorship is criminalizing democracy and fueling migration to the U.S."

# Why do people leave?

Nicaragua is part of the 'dry corridor' running through Central America

Fewer job opportunities in Costa Rica: plentiful jobs in the US

US sanctions and threat of more sanctions (as highlighted recently on *Democracy Now*)

The US has made entry easier for Nicaraguans

**Mar Caribe**

**Oceáno Pacífico**







## Are they fleeing repression?

- Whatever they say when they reach the US border, practically all the migrant stories I've heard are about jobs
- Illegal work is easily available
- Little risk once you reach the US
- Established coyote networks since 2021
- Unrelenting propaganda in 'independent' media and from the US

**MOVING FOR  
PROSPERITY**

Global Migration  
and Labor  
Markets

## The new US plan for Nicaragua is a “brain drain”

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- “Humanitarian parole” (emotive term)
  - Applies only to four Latin American countries, plus Ukraine
  - Sponsored people, if accepted, are given permission to work for two years: must apply from outside US
  - 30,000 places monthly; backlog of 1.7m applications
  - Those accepted can travel normally
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# US Embassy in Managua and 'independent' media encourage Nicaraguans to apply for 'parole'

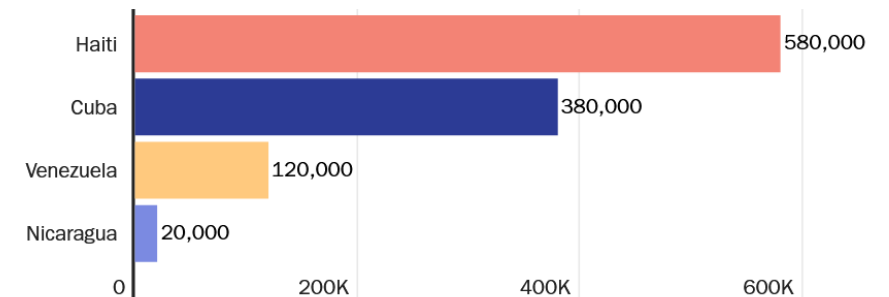
- Promotional videos in social media
- Almost daily instructions about migrating in *La Prensa* and *Confidencial*, US-funded 'independent' media
- Numbers of Nicaraguans crossing the border illegally have fallen by 99%
- Out of 270,000 parole "arrivals" by October 2023, 48,000 were Nicaraguans
- But of the large backlog of cases, Nicaraguans form the smallest number (see chart)

[www.cato.org/briefing-paper/parole-sponsorship-revolution-immigration-policy](https://www.cato.org/briefing-paper/parole-sponsorship-revolution-immigration-policy)

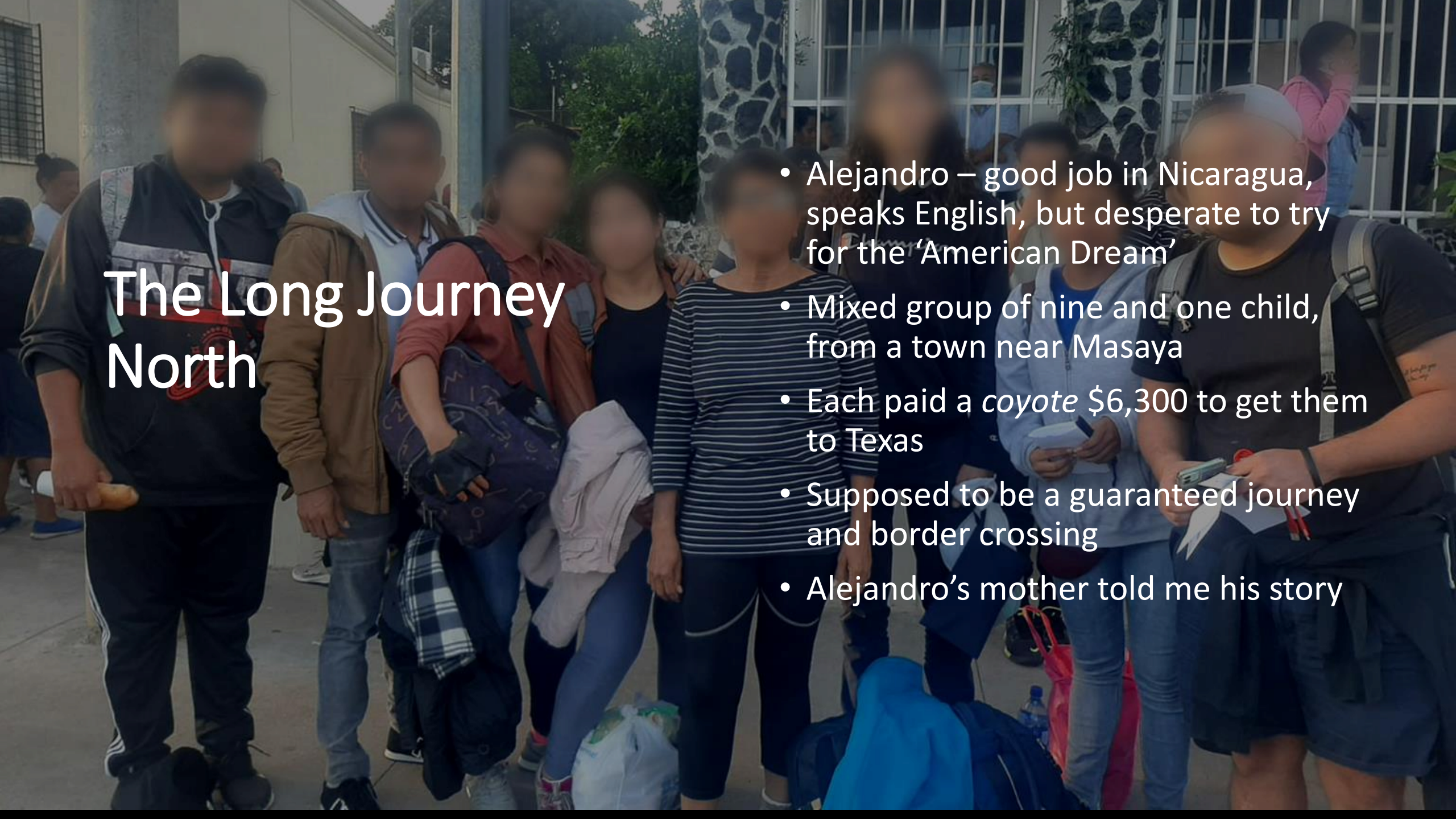


Figure 3

Parole sponsorship backlog by country, April 30, 2023



Source: Camilo Montoya-Galvez, "1.5 Million Apply for U.S. Migrant Sponsorship Program with 30,000 Monthly Cap," CBS News, updated May 22, 2023.



## The Long Journey North

- Alejandro – good job in Nicaragua, speaks English, but desperate to try for the ‘American Dream’
- Mixed group of nine and one child, from a town near Masaya
- Each paid a *coyote* \$6,300 to get them to Texas
- Supposed to be a guaranteed journey and border crossing
- Alejandro’s mother told me his story



## VARADOS A MÁS DE 4000 KILÓMETROS DE NICARAGUA

Ciudad Juárez, en Chihuahua, al norte de México, es la "última estación" de los migrantes que buscan entrar a suelo estadounidense. Los migrantes nicaragüenses varados en esta localidad están a 4077 kilómetros de Managua, ciudad capital de su país.



## The long journey north

Bus to Mexican border, then more than a week of car journeys

Held hostage at border with four others – demand for extra \$7,000 between them

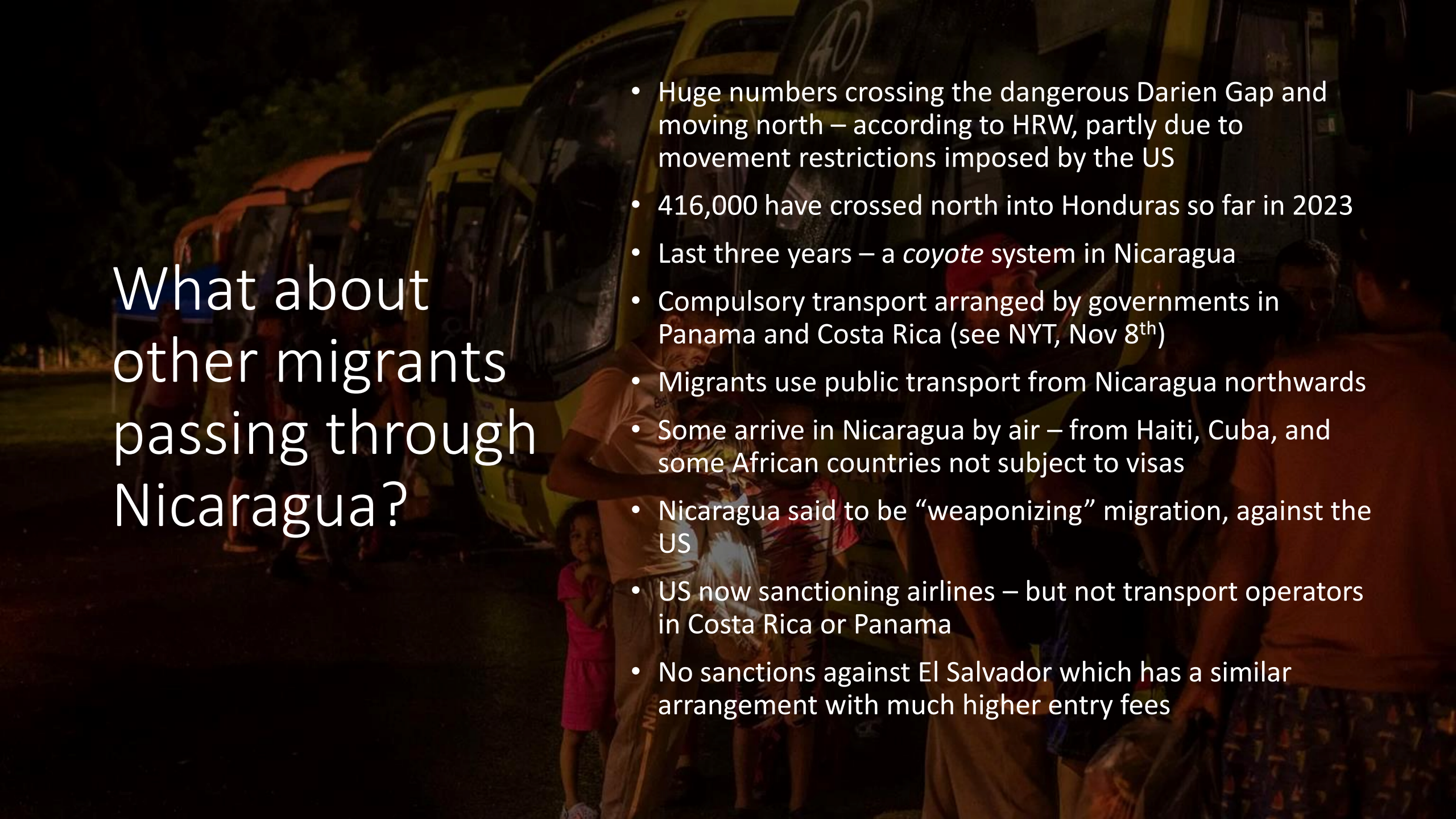
Relatives borrow again to find the cash

Cross Rio Grande, roped together, handed over to border officials to plead asylum

Case deferred until 2034, goes to New York then back to Texas to work, then moves north again - working as a roofer

Regrets journey as finding it very difficult to earn enough to live and also pay off debts

Wants to come back as soon as he can afford it

A photograph of a line of yellow buses parked at night. Several people, including a man in a red cap and a woman in a pink dress, are standing around the buses. The scene is dimly lit, with some light reflecting off the buses and the people's clothing.

# What about other migrants passing through Nicaragua?

- Huge numbers crossing the dangerous Darien Gap and moving north – according to HRW, partly due to movement restrictions imposed by the US
- 416,000 have crossed north into Honduras so far in 2023
- Last three years – a *coyote* system in Nicaragua
- Compulsory transport arranged by governments in Panama and Costa Rica (see NYT, Nov 8<sup>th</sup>)
- Migrants use public transport from Nicaragua northwards
- Some arrive in Nicaragua by air – from Haiti, Cuba, and some African countries not subject to visas
- Nicaragua said to be “weaponizing” migration, against the US
- US now sanctioning airlines – but not transport operators in Costa Rica or Panama
- No sanctions against El Salvador which has a similar arrangement with much higher entry fees



A photograph of a crowded bus interior. Passengers are seated in blue patterned seats, and some are standing. The bus is moving, as indicated by the blurred background visible through the windows. The lighting is somewhat dim, suggesting it might be nighttime or in a shaded area.

# Myth or reality?

- Nicaraguans have always migrated, but probably more are doing so now than in the past
- Much fewer than 1 in 10 – maybe 1 in 20?
- Is it because of repression? – in most cases, no, despite asylum claims being made
- The US is draining Nicaragua of the brightest young people
- Opposition media are encouraging people to go