

CONTENTIOUS RESPONSES TO ASYLUM EXTERNALIZATION AND ENTRAPMENT: THE CASE OF CIUDAD JUÁREZ, CHIHUAHUA

Isabel Gil-Everaert

SUMMARY

Since the late 2010s, mobility dynamics in Ciudad Juárez have changed. Flows of migrants, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people have increased significantly with the intention of crossing the U.S. border – in many cases – to seek asylum. As these flows increased in size and frequency, the United States government started implementing diverse measures to restrict border crossings and complicating access to asylum, such as metering lists, the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPPs), Title 42 expedited removals, and the implementation of the CBP One app.

These changes in mobility flows, migration, and asylum policy became an issue of contention at the local, binational, and national levels and elicited varied responses at the local level (in Ciudad Juárez) and binationally (Ciudad Juárez–El Paso). In this text, I focus on a particular response, *Iniciativa Juárez*, which involved unlikely alliances between different sectors such as the local, state, and federal government; the maquila sector; civil society and religious organizations, academia, and international organizations. I argue that moments of contention can detonate opportunities for novel collaboration, the emergence and strengthening of cross-sector networks, and creative responses to changing social dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

In late March 2021, I travelled to Ciudad Juárez¹ to observe the rollout of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPPs) after they had been suspended for more than a year due to the border closure imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. By visiting shelters and interviewing key actors, in the midst of heavy public health restrictions and general fear of contagion, I met human rights activists who were working on a temporary housing program for migrants and asylum seekers who were forced to wait in the city for their turn to start an asylum process in the United States. After a brief interview at a coffee shop in downtown Juárez, they suggested speaking with a local migration scholar who worked at a university, led an interdisciplinary migration studies group, and served as a local delegate of the National Institute for Migration in Ciudad Juárez. This struck me as an unlikely recommendation: a human rights activist mentioning an agent of the government's migration agency as a trustworthy source of information for a research project. However, it soon became clear that, in Juárez, these sorts of unlikely alliances were more common than one would expect. The interview with the university professor led to an interview with a leader of the maquila sector, which in turn led to interviews with a local journalist and an evangelical pastor. The ease and openness in the responses of those contacted through these references was also surprising. During a brief visit, amid a pandemic and a critical moment for migration and displacement in the city, fourteen interviews were conducted with very busy yet extremely generous individuals across a wide array of sectors.

After several meetings, it became apparent that mobility dynamics in the city had changed in the past few years, as had the diverse responses to these transformations. This study examines how cooperation, contention, tension, and strategic action by different actors have contributed to addressing the situation at the border in the past five years (2019-2024).

This article is based on data gathered from 2021 to 2025 through four field visits (March and October 2021, October 2024, and January 2025). During those visits, twenty-six in-depth interviews were conducted with people from various sectors involved in the city's migration dynamics. Of those interviews, eight were members of shelter staff, two were federal government officials, two were municipal government officials, one was a state government official, four were staff members of international organizations, one was a local journalist, one was a maquila sector leader, three were people who worked in civil society organizations, and four were experts/scholars of local academic institution. I also attended several public and private events featuring diverse participants, including conferences, meetings, seminars, and rallies. I visited six shelters, mostly run by religious leaders, and conducted participant observation at key locations in Juárez, such as the city center and the Paso del Norte International Bridge.

CONTEXT: CIUDAD JUÁREZ REGAINS ITS PLACE AS A MIGRATION HUB/NODE

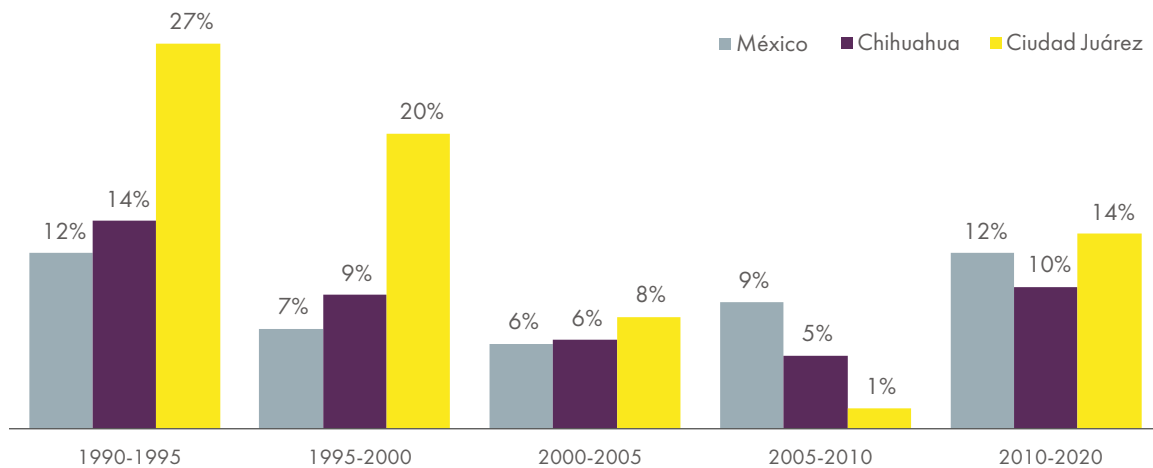
Ciudad Juárez, located on the border with El Paso, Texas, has been one of the most relevant border cities in the history of U.S.-Mexico relations. Since the early 90s, Ciudad Juárez has gradually lost prominence as a transit and deportation hub for several reasons (Rubio Salas, 2024). First, a shift in U.S. migration policy led to the implementation of several strategies to halt irregular border crossings through Juárez, modifying established crossing routes and displacing them toward less populated and surveilled border territories. This tendency only increased after the attacks on 9/11, which further consolidated the narrative of border surveillance as an issue of national security.

Second, after the 2006 declaration of so-called war on drugs in Mexico, Ciudad Juárez became one of the most violent cities in the world (Cervera Gómez & Monárrez Fragoso, 2013; Henrique Costa et al., 2020), with a “dramatic increase in homicide rates in 2008” (Ramos Luna, 2013, p. 13), leading to a rate of 130 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2009 (El Economista, 2009). That same year, the national homicide rate was 17.5 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants (INEGI, 2025). On top of the increase in violence, the 2008 financial crisis deeply impacted the U.S. economy and, coupled with the rise in violence and insecurity, led to a “turning point in the city’s migratory dynamics”². The convergence of heightened insecurity and violence with a global economic crisis led to a decrease in immigration to Juárez and an increase in out-migration (Rubio Salas, 2024).

There was “an agreement between the U.S. government and the municipal government of Juárez to halt deportations through Juárez”³ because of the conditions of violence. This led to a stark reduction in deportations of Mexicans from the United States through Juárez that lasted for years. According to official data from the Mexican government,⁴ annual deportations through Juárez were around 50,000 between 1995 and 2006. Once the war on drugs started, this number lowered to less than half (around 23,000 on average). During this period (2006-2018), while deportations through the state of Chihuahua declined, other states, such as Tamaulipas and Coahuila, became prominent destinations for the forced return of Mexican nationals.

Many people left Juárez in response to the rise in violence and insecurity (Rubio Salas, 2024; Rodríguez Chávez, 2024). This out-migration was “massive, especially in the southeastern part of the city, all those houses (*fraccionamientos*) were left empty”⁵ (Contreras Saldaña, 2021; Maycotte Pansza, 2017). Juárez became a place of expulsion, contrary to the city’s historical immigration patterns, which had been driven by labor demand in the maquila sector. As shown in Figure 1, before 2010, the population in Ciudad Juárez grew rapidly, with rates that more than doubled the national and state averages. However, from 2000 to 2005, there was an initial decline in this growth rate, and between 2005 and 2010, the population in Juárez grew only 1%, showing a sharp decline.

FIGURE 1. Population Growth Rate in Mexico, Chihuahua, and Cd. Juárez, 1990-2020



Source: Elaborated by author with Mexican Census Data (1990-2020) (INEGI, 2024)

As it became known that the levels of violence in the city were growing, many of those in transit towards the United States avoided Ciudad Juárez and instead took the Pacific route (towards Tijuana, Baja California) or the Gulf of Mexico route (towards Matamoros or Reynosa in Tamaulipas). Ciudad Juárez's position as a place outside the traditional and concurred transit routes towards the United States would change radically in 2018.

In 2017, President Obama ended the “wet feet, dry feet”⁶ policy after more than twenty years (Obama, 2017). Without the possibility of directly traveling towards the U.S. and being admitted, Cubans started searching for alternative routes to reach the United States. Factors such as the deterioration of living conditions in the island, and changes in migratory policies in the region, have increased the flow of Cubans to and through Mexico. In early 2018, a group of Cubans arrived in Ciudad Juárez intending to cross the border to the U.S. to request asylum.⁷

Around mid-October 2018, a small, informal encampment began to appear next to the Paso del Norte International Bridge on the Mexican side of the border between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, Texas. What began as a group of around thirty asylum seekers rapidly grew to more than 200 people, who came from Cuba, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Venezuela (Corona, 2018). While this encampment started to develop on the border, a larger group of approximately 6,000 migrants, later known as the first “migrant Caravan,” was making its way from Honduras through Mexico and towards the U.S. border (Camhaji, 2018; Colef, 2019; Gandini et al., 2020; Torre Cantalapiedra, 2022).

The situation at the border became more complicated with the implementation of the Mi-grant Protection Protocols (MPPs), also known as the “Remain in Mexico” program, in early 2019. Through MPPs, more than 70,000 asylum seekers were sent back to Mexico to wait for their date in asylum courts in the United States. Three out of every ten people returned under MPP were sent to wait in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. In Ciudad Juárez, 39% of those returned under MPP were women. In terms of nationality, one in four people returned to Ciudad Juárez were from Cuba, followed by Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Ecuadorians (TRAC Immigration, 2022).

In March 2020, following the official declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. government implemented a drastic change in border policy: Title 42. This allowed for the immediate expulsion of anyone who attempted to cross the Mexico – U.S. border, which affected both migrants and potential asylum seekers. In the thirty-eight months that the policy was implemented (March 2020 – May 2023), there were 2.96 million expulsion events (CBP, 2024), out of which 60% were Mexican nationals, 34.3% Central Americans, and the other 3.5% from South America and the Caribbean (Carrillo, 2025; UPMRIP, 2023).

Following the end of Title 42 in May 2023, the Biden administration implemented CBP One, a mobile app, as the primary means for asylum seekers who wanted to enter the United States via its land borders. This app became the only way to request access to the United States through special programs such as CHNV parole for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans (AIC, 2025). Close to 940,000 migrants and asylum seekers used the CBP One app to schedule appointments to enter the United States (Rose, 2025). When President Donald Trump assumed office for a second time in January 2025, he immediately suspended the CHNV parole program. He also cancelled the use of CBP One, effectively closing all avenues for requesting asylum at the U.S.–Mexico border and cancelling more than 30,000 pending appointments (Graham, 2025).

Between the Cubans that arrived in early 2018, those who made their way to Juárez through the caravans, and those returned to wait in Juárez through MPP, many migrants, internally displaced people, and asylum seekers were suddenly stuck in Juárez for months, if not years. The Director of the Municipal Human Rights Institute of Juárez stated that more than 19,000 migrants from diverse nationalities—mainly Cubans—made their way to Ciudad Juárez between October 2018 and November 2019 looking to request asylum in the United States (Gamboa, 2019). It is important to note that the different strategies and policies implemented on the border in the past years have had differential impacts in terms of nationalities.

TAKEN BY SURPRISE: REACTIONS TO NEW MOBILITY DYNAMICS IN THE CITY

Ciudad Juárez is a border city not only in terms of its geographical location but also in its social dynamics. Cross-border families are common; many people work in El Paso and live in Juárez, and vice versa. The street that leads from downtown Juárez to the Paso del Norte bridge is filled with optometrists who offer cheap and fast prescription glasses for those who come to the city and plan to return to the U.S. on the same day. Additionally, many of those who live on the Mexican side commonly cross the border to purchase groceries, clothes, and school supplies. In other words, life in the Juárez-El Paso area is profoundly interconnected, albeit separated by one of the most surveilled international borders in the world.

This text engages with literature that conceives borders as socio-spatial entities that are created and contested by continuous discourses and practices (Iossifova, 2020), acknowledging how borders are historically and politically produced and materialized into “practices, symbols, institutions and networks” (Paasi, 2012, p. 2304). Secondly, it conceives of borders as specific spaces that structure social action in particular ways, rather than as fixed, clearly bounded spatial entities (Lefebvre, 2013).

It is undeniable that mobility dynamics are central to the structuring of social life in Juárez. As the previous section outlines, mobility dynamics in Ciudad Juárez have changed over time and, in turn, transformed the city's social dynamics. This study focuses on a particular moment in which a transformation in the mobility context led to a reorganization of social life for many city inhabitants.

By 2018, after years of a slowdown in mobility to and through Juárez, it had become evident that dynamics were changing. Large groups of people arrived in the city to seek asylum in the United States. Rather than a rapid cross through Juárez on the way north or a short stay for Mexican deportees, most of the people arriving were non-Mexican and travelling with their families to seek asylum. These changes were quickly perceived by U.S. authorities, who responded by intensifying border surveillance and implementing a range of strategies to control border crossings. Among these were the metering lists, the Migrant Protection Protocols, expedited returns under Title 42, and the implementation of the CBP One app. As policies hardened, migrants and asylum seekers were trapped in the city, forced to wait for long periods of time and, in many cases, with little to no access to basic services, housing, and means of labor inclusion (Miranda & Hernández, 2022; MSF, 2020; Silva & Miranda, 2020).

However, the impacts of these transformations in (im)mobility dynamics were not limited to migrants and asylum seekers. For the first time in decades, Ciudad Juárez's capacity to receive and shelter migrants was exceeded. According to local activists and shelter directors, by late 2018, their facilities were overcrowded, and their resources were running out. To make matters worse, they had not received any support from the municipal, state, or national governments (Gallegos, 2018). In December, as temperatures dropped, the municipal government opened a temporary shelter at the Kiki Romero sports facility. Migrants camping along the border were encouraged to go with the assurance that they would not lose their "place in line" to seek asylum in the United States. However, many migrants refused to move from the border, showing an evident lack of trust in the Mexican authorities. According to journalistic accounts on site, some of the people interviewed stated things like, "we would rather jump off the bridge than move" and "we will stay here, even if it rains and we get sick. Neither I nor others will move"⁸ (Domínguez, 2018).

This sudden change in mobility dynamics took the city "by surprise," just as the caravans had with the Mexican government and other relevant actors. The head of the State Population Council (COESPO, from its name in Spanish)⁹ in Juárez explicitly stated, "this has surprised us all: the city was not part of traditional migratory routes for them (Cubans), and now Juárez is full of Cubans" (Lima, 2019). Not knowing how to proceed, the events were understood and framed as a crisis, an emergency, and an unprecedented turn of events.

In October 2018, the state government of Chihuahua established the State Council for the Protection and Attention for Migrants¹⁰ (COESPAM, from its name in Spanish), coordinated by the COESPO. The Council's purpose was to formulate public policies and strategic responses to protect migrants arriving in Ciudad Juárez. This included several government entities, as well as social and private-sector actors. This strategy involved opening of a center for the attention of migrants located right beneath the Paso del Norte International Bridge. This center became the site where the metering¹¹ list of Juárez was managed in 2019 (previously the list had been managed by the Casa del Migrante shelter). According to members interviewed for this project, more than 21,300 people signed up on the list, the only one in

Juárez, an “atypical case, because, in other border cities, everyone started their list, while we (in Juárez) consolidated all names onto one list.”¹²

While COESPO and the municipal authorities were trying to determine how to address migrants camping along the border, churches and local organizations were responding faster to the needs and urgencies of the displaced populations. In 2018, there were only two spaces¹³ in the city for migrants. By 2020, there were more than twenty-three spaces, mostly within churches or religious temples, capable of hosting around 3,000 people. This meant that, in less than two years, Juárez had equated the sheltering and attention capacity of cities such as Tijuana (Gil Everaert, 2021; Mani, 2021), a city with a historically strong network of shelters, organizations and attention strategies for migrants in transit and asylum seekers. This rapid grassroots response was followed by the arrival of international organizations such as UNHCR, IOM, and DWB,¹⁴ which provided a new influx of resources and logistical know-how on how to respond to a humanitarian crisis.

The collaboration between civil society organizations, religious leaders, and newly arrived international actors pressured the three levels of government to get involved. According to a local scholar, “the federal, state, and municipal government would not have done what they did if those churches and temples hadn’t acted and taken the matter into their own hands.”¹⁵ As shelters emerged and pressure rose, the state government started providing subsidies on electricity or water for shelters, as well as sporadic material donations of mattresses, blankets, or food.

At the same time, other sectors of the population in Juárez and El Paso were also evaluating how to address the current and possible future effects of the new migratory dynamics in the city. Among these, the cross-border maquila sector was particularly affected by the shift in cross-border movement from Juárez to El Paso. A large part of the economy in Juárez depends on what is known as the “just in time” production process. This involves a complex chain in which production starts in one location, is transported to another site, and is then transported as a semi-finished product to another part for assembly. Among other things, this means that maquilas and other industries do not have large storage capacity because production depends on the timely circulation of products across the border.¹⁶

In late 2019, trailers carrying products from these cross-border production chains took more than thirty hours to cross the border. This delay involved the de facto “halt of the chain of production and the collapse of the industry, because assembly lines in the United States are dependent on maquilas in the Mexican side.”¹⁷ As large groups of migrants and asylum seekers arrived at the border with El Paso, international bridges were virtually closed on several occasions (Diario de Juárez, 2019; Vargas, 2018), and many customs agents were sent to surveil the border and supervise migratory checkpoints, leaving only a few to manage the lawful entry of goods into the United States.

INICIATIVA JUÁREZ: RESPONSES TO AN EPISODE OF CONTENTIOUS POLITICS AT THE BORDER

*“Que cada quien cuide su milpita, yo digo,
y pues la milpita es nuestra ciudad”*
(Everyone should take care of their
little field and our field is our city)¹⁸

There was a general sense of confusion and paralysis as the situation rapidly changed. The changing mobility dynamics were becoming an issue of contention (McAdam et al., 2001). Contention is defined as “episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, and object of claims or a party to the claims, and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants.” (McAdam et al., 2001, p. 5). In the following section of this text, I will argue that the change in mobility dynamics in the city led to an increase in tensions and conflict, but also to the unlikely encounter between different actors motivated by diverse interests in an attempt to address or respond to the situation.

This study examines how a particular moment of contention led to a temporal reorganization of social relationships in Juárez. While many studies focus on the causes of contention or conflict, and how social change may impact or cause contention, less is known about “how contention causes social change” (Tilly, 1997, p. 51). By exploring the various responses to the migratory crisis in the city, I examine how interactions among actors with distinct interests led to coordinated efforts to address a migration and displacement contingency (Heyman et al., 2018). In what could be considered a case of “transgressive contention” (McAdam et al., 2001), a set of actors both established and emerging, formed a temporal coalition to respond to rising numbers of migrants and refugees arriving—and staying—in the city, which happened during a pandemic and a rise in restrictions and hostility in the border with the United States.

Contention, in other words, served as a generative force for innovative collective action, organized responses, and the reorganization of social interaction among actors across different spaces of the city. Below, I outline some of the events and strategies that participants in this episode of contention highlight as key moments that shaped how a crisis and change were addressed locally.

According to a local scholar, there was a general lack of clarity around “the problem we were facing. Everyone saw only one part. For some, it was the industry; for others, it was a political issue that no one wanted to take responsibility for. There was an urgent need to clarify and prioritize the problem.”¹⁹ There were several problems, though, like “those that had to do with shelter and regularization of migrants,” but also “problems that derived from those main issues,”²⁰ such as those faced by the maquila sector or other sectors of the city. This effort of defining the problems or issues took place in roundtables and meetings, both formal and informal, and led, according to a local scholar, to “the establishment of a new public policy agenda on the one hand, and a humanitarian agenda on the other.”²¹

In a way, this lack of clarity about the problem revealed the disconnect between different sectors and the poor concerted effort to address it. While some were struggling to provide shelter and safety for migrants and asylum seekers, others were concerned about the impact

that the situation was having in their production processes, and the different levels of government were far away from a coordinated and organized response, because they “can’t stand, or even know each other.”²² As put by one local actor: “Now with the migratory conjuncture and talking about the interruption of the binational production chain because of border closings, we decided to take action. The authorities do not create public policy that responds to the reality of international industries.”²³

In this context, a group of businessmen from the maquila sector decided to convene with other relevant stakeholders to create a citizen-led initiative that would later be known as *Iniciativa Juárez* (IJ). For this group, the issue was multifaceted, and the course of action had to address the multiple dimensions: “economic, humanitarian, and a program of emergent regularization.”²⁴ The initial spark of this group of maquila leaders led to a series of meetings with other key actors in Juárez. On the one hand, they acknowledged that “those that were taking care of the situation on the ground were churches and shelters,”²⁵ so they started by approaching them.

On the other hand, there was a call to the three levels of government to respond to the situation. We had to “stop authorities who only wanted the spotlight and confront them,” they were playing a sort of “hot potato game.”²⁶ The maquila sector leaders had a personal relationship with the Migration Delegate in Juárez, so they approached him and “convinced him (Migration Delegate) that it was his responsibility, and we went to talk with Marcelo Ebrard (former Exterior Minister and current Minister of Economics) so he could tell him everything that was happening (in Juárez).”²⁷ According to their testimonies, this meeting resulted in the creation of the National Intersectoral Commission for the Integral Attention in Migration (*Comisión Intersecretarial de Atención Integral en Materia Migratoria*), and the naming of the Commissioner—Horacio Duarte—, whose first official field visit was to Juárez. This Commission would lead the federal government’s efforts to respond to the migratory crisis in several border cities in Mexico, and Duarte, the Commissioner, had “power of decision over all government agencies, which was key in the process.”²⁸

When asked about the achievements of *Iniciativa Juárez*, its members are both proud and cautious. They highlight that, through concerted efforts, they were able to issue migrants CURPs (identification numbers) and RFCs (taxpayer IDs) so they could work. They mentioned that their pressure on the federal government led to the establishment of the Migrant Integration Center Leona Vicario, the first in the country, and that they were key in bringing international organizations such as IOM, UNHCR, and DWB to work in the city. This initiative was key in creating networks and strengthening human resources. However, they acknowledge that they have no data on the insertion of migrants into the local labor force and on the integration processes. As time passed, meetings became less frequent, most participants returned to work as usual, and collaboration networks were diluted.

Beyond its material achievements, *Iniciativa Juárez*, according to its founding members, was key in resisting the imposition of xenophobic narratives against migrants. In Juárez, “the dominant narrative was one of a welcoming city. The city as a sanctuary, as a place that supports you, that is flexible.”²⁹ This narrative, however, was not something that “was there and just emerged,” he continued, it was “the product of certain processes of political construction.”

REPERTOIRES OF CONTENTION: *INICIATIVA JUÁREZ* AND ITS SPECIFIC ACTIONS AND MODES OF INTERACTION

The notion of repertoires of contention in social movements, put forward by Charles Tilly (McAdam et al., 2001; Tilly, 1997), emphasizes that collective action is built on interaction and relies on both prior knowledge and innovation (Alimi, 2014). In other words, the ways in which individuals or groups act in a given situation result from a set of skills and knowledge, on how interaction is shaped and shapes actions and responses, and different ways of planning, improvising, and learning through practice. A central question for studies of contention and collective action is “how particular repertoires are selected and change during contentious interaction” (Alimi, 2014, p. 411). This section outlines specific collective action repertoires enacted in Ciudad Juárez during a particular period of contention (2018-2025).

As more migrants and refugees arrived in Ciudad Juárez and encountered a closed border, waiting times were extended leading to an increase in uncertainty, tension, and contingency in the city, involving a wide array of actors. This led to more complex interactions among actors, both in formal and informal settings. This situation coalesced into an episode of contention that affected diverse sectors of the city and generated a wide array of responses. The following pages focus on *Iniciativa Juárez* and the specific repertoires of knowledge and action that were implemented during this period.

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE

During interviews with members of *Iniciativa Juárez*, there were constant references to the “innovative” character of this response. At the same time, some of its members alluded to prior civil society or citizen efforts to respond to local contingencies and explained that “this city has been a lab, [and,] unfortunately, there is no follow-up.”³⁰

The first was the creation of the maquila sector:

“I am the youngest of the promoters of the maquila. I was part of the citizen-based initiative since the times of Reagan, when he closed the border. There was a need to create employment, technologies...I was part of those who promoted the maquila in that moment. Work with government moves fast when you establish a bridge between decision makers and those operating/implementing on the ground.”³¹

The second was the security crisis in the late 2010s:

“In terms of security, we had too much to lose if we citizens did not take a more active role in addressing the situation. We established the Citizens Observatory (*Observatorio Ciudadano*), which subsequently evolved into the Security Worktables (*Mesas de Seguridad*). It was a project designed to work with the government and align the three levels of government.”³²

The third was the current migratory situation:

“Now, with the migratory conjuncture and talking about the interruption of the binational production chain because of border closings, we decided to take action. The authorities do not create public policy that responds to the reality of international industries.”³³

LOCAL AND BI-NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

In interviews and conversations, there was a sense of pride in the “juarenses” identity reflected in this response and in the ways the city and its inhabitants had addressed a challenging situation.

“Don’t try to fix the world; this has to be a local initiative. This has to be done very locally, take care of your own little piece of land. That way, you don’t hurt the egos of those who want to go big.”³⁴

However, it was also clear that they conceived the problem as a bi-national issue, which had to be addressed by integrating actors—government in Mexico and the United States, as well as civil society—on both sides of the border.³⁵ As one of the founding members shared, “We had a meeting with counterparts in the United States to oil the machine to be able to respond locally, from a cross-border standpoint. This is certainly a cross-border initiative.”³⁶

FLEXIBILITY AND TRUST

From the outset of my fieldwork, it became clear that most members of *Iniciativa Juárez* were personally acquainted with one another and even maintained friendships that extended beyond this context. They referred to each other by nicknames, knew each other’s families, and joked around in meetings and interviews. There was a clear difference in dynamics between the core group of *Iniciativa Juárez* (members of the maquila sector and some scholars/academics) and those who joined later, such as shelter staff and government officials. Nevertheless, the general atmosphere when I was able to attend gatherings and events organized by *Iniciativa Juárez* was one of trust and informality.

In a way, the lack of formally established institutional mechanisms was, paradoxically, perceived by some as an opportunity. According to a local scholar,

“I believe that the city, its institutions, or the government agencies were not ready to receive migrants. So, this led to a ‘what should we do? How should we act?’ and I think this led to collaboration among different actors. The dynamic was not as tainted as in other places where attention networks and structures are more consolidated as in Tijuana.”³⁷

This was consistent with members’ testimonies, which emphasized the importance of informality and the flexibility and creativity it allows: “This whole organization is informal, which grants it a great degree of flexibility and trust. It is based on goodwill, and not rigid commitments.”³⁸ When asked whether it would be advisable to institutionalize *Iniciativa Juárez*, most members responded emphatically, “No.” Institutionalization would be more

of a loss than a win, according to one of the founding members. In other efforts, “institutions were an obstacle, we like to think more of governance than institutionalization,”³⁹ he continued, “we have to shield these efforts from clientelism and political patronages,” which proved to be one of the forces behind failed government responses to the current situation. The idea behind *Iniciativa Juárez* was to strengthen the citizenship pole to “move the government.”⁴⁰ In a way, the emphasis on trust and flexibility as a counterproposal to institutionalization and bureaucratization, sheds light on the perceptions and past experiences of the members of *Iniciativa Juárez*. Facing a government that at the local and national levels has been slow to respond to previous (economic development, security, and violence) and current crises (migration and asylum), the possibility of acting flexibly and basing their decisions on trust and creativity seems to articulate better the mode of local and bi-national governance that has proved helpful for Ciudad Juárez.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In a global context where xenophobic and discriminatory narratives and practices against migrants and refugees abound, it was surprising to encounter a businessman talking about human rights, the centrality of hospitality, and emphasizing the importance of integrating migrants and asylum seekers. However, these narratives were part of a broader effort to address a complex migratory situation with multiple local impacts that required a multisector, multiscale response.

In his work on contentious politics, Charles Tilly promotes a “relational analysis of contentious politics which emphasizes the changing connections between social actors” (Tilly, 1997, p. 51). Throughout this study, I have attempted to show how a particular episode of contention promoted unlikely alliances among actors, reshaped existing connections, and generated new relations among them.

As with many other social dynamics, transformations in migratory flows and conditions are felt more intensely at the local level. Border communities are, without question, those most affected and those most likely to benefit from improved migration management. The arrival of more migrants and asylum seekers—especially in short time periods—poses challenges in terms of housing, access to basic health services, employment, and education that evidence the need for inter-sectoral and multi-level government collaboration. In these moments, the role of civil society as a mediator is crucial, especially in communities such as Juárez, where organized civil society is tightly connected and has prior experience addressing local issues. These events open opportunities for local leaders to increase their political capital by appealing to different sectors, mobilizing their supporters, and inviting others to participate in local solutions and responses to contingencies.

It is crucial to recognize that spaces of contention are also spaces of opportunity, and novel forms of collaboration may open avenues for understanding local dynamics and governance. This emphasizes the importance of cross-sector networks, their density, trust, and openness to creative responses to address issues that impact and will continue to impact communities globally.

In 2023, a fire occurred at the migrant detention center in Ciudad Juárez operated by the National Migration Institute. Forty detained migrants died in the fire, and 27 others survived with severe injuries. Several investigations have concluded that the fire and

resulting tragedy could have been avoided if the infrastructure of the detention center had followed construction and civil protection standards. More specifically, the incident could have been avoided if the security personnel had opened the door instead of trapping the migrants inside, and if the conditions established in Mexican migration law, oriented towards the protection of the human rights of migrants and asylum seekers, were respected. However, this incident reflects a change in the local narrative towards migration in the city. A few days before the fire, local media, government authorities, and a sector of the local population had expressed their discontent towards migrants who were panhandling and living on the streets⁴¹. This led to heightened pressure on local authorities, who responded by detaining close to 100 migrant men and women and their lockdown in the migrant detention center in conditions of overcrowding and without access to basic needs (IMUMI, 2024).

It remains to be seen whether these alliances and cooperation networks will persist over time and whether they can address and respond to changing circumstances or emerging local challenges that the binational community of Juárez and El Paso may face in the near future.

REFERENCES

- ADN CUBA. (2019). *Unos 4.500 cubanos que esperan asilo de EEUU elevan la tensión en Ciudad Juárez*. <https://adncuba.com/en/migracion/unos-4500-cubanos-que-esperan-asilo-de-eeuu-elevan-la-tension-en-ciudad-juarez>
- AIC. (2025). *CBP One: An Overview* [Fact Sheet]. American Immigration Council. https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/cbp_one_an_over-view_0325.pdf
- Alimi, E. Y. (2014). Repertoires of Contention. En D. Della Porta & M. Diani (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements* (pp. 410–422). Oxford University Press. <https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/28119/chapter/212273295>
- American Immigration Council. (2021). *Metering and Asylum Turnbacks*. American Immigration Council. <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/metering-and-asylum-turnbacks>
- Camhaji, E. (2018, noviembre 9). La caravana migrante sale dividida de Ciudad de México hacia EE UU. *El País*. https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/11/08/mexico/1541699531_224808.html
- Carrillo, R. (2025). Efecto del Título 42 sobre la migración irregular en México durante la pandemia de COVID-19. *Revista Latinoamericana de Población*, 19, e202508–e202508. <https://doi.org/10.31406/relap2025.v19.e202508>
- CBP. (2024). *Nationwide Enforcement Encounters: Title 8 Enforcement Actions and Title 42 Expulsions*. Customs and Border Protection. <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/cbp-enforcement-statistics/title-8-and-title-42-statistics>
- Cervera Gómez, L. E., & Monárrez Fragoso, J. E. (Eds.). (2013). *Geografía de la violencia en Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua*. El Colegio de la Frontera Norte.
- Colef. (2019, diciembre 5). Caravanas migrantes de Centroamérica. *Este Mes*. <https://www.colef.mx/estemes/caravanas-migrantes-de-centroamericanos/>

- Contreras Saldaña, M. E. (2021). *Habitando territorios de expulsión. Efectos socioterritoriales en dos fraccionamientos de interés social en Ciudad Juárez, 2008-2019* [Doctorado en Urbanismo]. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- Corona, S. (2018, noviembre 13). La larga espera a las puertas de Estados Unidos. *El País*. https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/11/12/mexico/1541985880_630608.html
- CRS. (2022). *The Department of Homeland Security's "Metering" Policy: Legal Issues*. Congressional Research Service. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/LSB/LSB10295>
- Diario de Juárez. (2019, julio 1). Cierran puente Paso del Norte por protesta de migrantes. *El Diario de Juárez*. <https://diario.mx/juarez/2019/jul/01/cierran-puente-paso-del-norte-por-protesta-de-migrantes-482552.html>
- Domínguez, V. (2018, noviembre 12). Se quejan cubanos de intento de desalojo. *El Diario mx*. <https://diario.mx/juarez/2018/nov/13/se-quejan-cubanos-de-intento-de-desalojo-788154.html>
- El Economista. (2009, agosto 26). *Juárez, la ciudad más violenta del mundo*. El Economista. <https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/politica/Juarez-la-ciudad-mas-violenta-del-mundo-20090826-0102.html>
- Gallegos, R. (2018, diciembre 30). *Ciudad Juárez, de ruta de migrantes a 'sala de espera' de EU – La Verdad Juárez*. <https://laverdadjuarez.com/2018/12/30/ciudad-juarez-de-ruta-de-migrantes-a-sala-de-espera-de-eu/>
- Gamboa, P. (2019, noviembre 23). *Juárez, refugio de 19 mil migrantes*. El Heraldo de Chi-huahua | Noticias Locales, Policiacas, de México, Chihuahua y el Mundo. <https://www.elheraldodechihuahua.com.mx/local/juarez-refugio-de-19-mil-migrantes-4492978.html>
- Gandini, L., Fernández de la Reguera, A., & Narváez Gutiérrez, J. C. (2020). *Caravanas*. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- Gil-Everaert, I. (2021, noviembre 3). De la emergencia a la gobernanza migratoria: El caso de Ciudad Juárez. *Observatorio migrante. Blog de movilidad poblacional*. <https://migracion.nexos.com.mx/2021/11/de-la-emergencia-a-la-gobernanza-migratoria-el-caso-de-ciudad-juarez/>
- Gil-Everaert, I., Masferrer, C., & Rodríguez Chávez, O. (2023). Concurrent Displacements: Re-turn, Waiting for Asylum, and Internal Displacement in Northern Mexico. *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 11(1), 125–148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23315024231158559>
- Graham, T. (2025, enero 23). US asylum seekers in despair after Trump cancels CBP One app: 'Start from zero again'. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jan/23/trump-cbp-one-app-cancelled-mexico>
- Henrique Costa, J., González Herrera, M. R., (2020). Criminalidad, seguridad pública y turismo en la zona fronteriza de Ciudad Juárez, México. *Estudios fronterizos*, 21. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2004046>
- Heyman, J., Slack, J., & Guerra, E. (2018). Bordering a "Crisis": Central American Asylum Seekers and the Reproduction of Dominant Border Enforcement Practices. *Journal of the Southwest*, 60(4), 754–786. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsw.2018.0015>
- IMUMI. (2024, abril 2). Incendio en la estancia migratoria de Ciudad Juárez. "No nos dejen morir aquí". IMUMI. <https://imumi.org/nuestras-publicaciones/incendio-en-la-estancia-migratoria-de-ciudad-juarez-no-nos-dejen-morir-aqui/>

- INEGI. (2024). *Información Demográfica y Social*. <https://www.inegi.org.mx/programas/ccpv/1990/#tabulados>
- INEGI. (2025). *Tasa bruta de homicidios por cada 100 mil habitantes*. https://www.inegi.org.mx/app/indicadores/?ind=6200002200&?ag=&tm=6#D6200002200_127
- Iossifova, D. (2020). Reading borders in the everyday: Bordering as practice. En J. W. Scott (Ed.), *A Research Agenda for Border Studies* (pp. 91–108). Edward Elgar.
- Lefebvre, H. (2013). *La producción del espacio*. Capitán Swing.
- Lima, L. (2019, julio 16). Cubanos en México: El oscuro mundo de extorsiones y secuestros que enfrentan los migrantes cubanos en Ciudad Juárez. *BBC News Mundo*. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-48999126>
- Mani, R. (2021, octubre 22). *Panorama General de la Red de Albergues*. La actualidad de los flujos migratorios en Ciudad Juárez, 2021 ¿Qué hacemos?, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. Maycotte Pansza, E. (2017). Movilidad social y vivienda: ¿Quiénes viven mejor en la vivienda social construida en Ciudad Juárez durante la primera década del siglo XXI? *Chihuahua Hoy*, 15, 225–256.
- McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., & Tilly, C. (2001). *Dynamics of Contention*. Cambridge University Press.
- Miranda, B., & Hernández, A. S. (2022). Gestión desbordada: Solicitudes de asilo en Estados Unidos y los mecanismos de espera allende sus fronteras. *Migraciones Internacionales*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.33679/rmi.v1i1.2385>
- MSF. (2020). *Sin Salida. La crisis humanitaria de la población migrante y solicitante de asilo atrapada entre Estados Unidos, México, y el Triángulo Norte de Centroamérica (TNCA)*. Médicos Sin Fronteras. <https://www.msf.es/sites/default/files/documents/in-forme-msf-mexico-sinsalida.pdf>
- Obama, B. (2017, enero 12). *Statement by the President on Cuban Immigration Policy*. Whitehouse.Gov. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/12/statement-president-cuban-immigration-policy>
- Paasi, A. (2012). Border studies reanimated: Going beyond the territorial/relational divide. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 44(10), 2303–2309.
- Ramos Luna, L. (2013). Prólogo. En L. E. Cervera Gómez & J. E. Monárrez Fragoso (Eds.), *Geografía de la violencia en Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua* (pp. 13–22). El Colegio de la Frontera Norte.
- Rodríguez Chávez, O. (2024). Características socioeconómicas y demográficas de las migraciones a Ciudad Juárez por tipos y motivos 2015-2020. En H. A. Padilla Delgado (Ed.), *Desafíos de la migración en Ciudad Juárez* (pp. 119–148). Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez.
- Rose, J. (2025, abril 8). Migrants who entered the U.S. via CBP One app should leave “immediately,” DHS says. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2025/04/08/g-s1-58984/cbp-one-app-migrants-dhs-border>
- Rubio Salas, R. (2024). Cambios en el comportamiento de los flujos migratorios en Ciudad Juárez (1990-2020): Una localidad fronteriza de origen, tránsito y destino. En H. A. Padilla Delgado (Ed.), *Desafíos de la migración en Ciudad Juárez* (pp. 97–118). Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez.
- Silva, A., & Miranda, B. (2020, julio 1). La espera como mecanismo de disuasión de la política de asilo de Estados Unidos. *Observatorio migrante. Blog de movilidad poblacional*. <https://migracion.nexos.com.mx/2020/07/la-espera-como-mecanismo-de-disuasion-de-la-politica-de-asilo-de-estados-unidos/>

- Rubio Salas, R. (2024). Cambios en el comportamiento de los flujos migratorios en Ciudad Juárez (1990-2020): Una localidad fronteriza de origen, tránsito y destino. En H. A. Padilla Delgado (Ed.), *Desafíos de la migración en Ciudad Juárez* (pp. 97–118). Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez.
- Silva, A., & Miranda, B. (2020, julio 1). La espera como mecanismo de disuasión de la política de asilo de Estados Unidos. *Observatorio migrante. Blog de movilidad poblacional*. <https://mi-gracion.nexos.com.mx/2020/07/la-espera-como-mecanismo-de-disuasion-de-la-politica-de-asilo-de-estados-unidos/>
- Tilly, C. (1997). Contentious politics and social change. *African Studies*, 56(1), 51–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00020189708707860>
- Torre Cantalapiedra, E. (2022). El estudio de las caravanas migrantes en México. *Norteamérica*, 17(2), 67–89. <https://doi.org/10.22201/cisan.24487228e.2022.2.525>
- TRAC Immigration. (2022). *Details on MPP (Remain in Mexico) Deportation Proceedings*. <https://trac.syr.edu/phptools/immigration/mpp4/>
- Univision. (2019). *Cientos de cubanos esperan en la frontera entre México y EEUU para solicitar asilo*. <https://www.univision.com/noticias/inmigracion/los-balseros-de-la-era-trump-cientos-de-cubanos-esperan-en-la-frontera-entre-mexico-y-eeuu-para-solicitar-asilo-fotos-fotos>
- UPMRIP. (2023). *Se registraron 2.7 millones de eventos de expulsión de personas bajo el Título 42, hasta febrero de 2023*. <https://www.gob.mx/segob/prensa/se-registraron-2-7-millones-de-eventos-de-expulsion-de-personas-bajo-el-titulo-42-hasta-febrero-de-2023>
- Vargas, A. (2018, octubre 31). Por cuarta ocasión cierran puente Paso del Norte. *El Diario de Juárez*. <https://diario.mx/local/2018/oct/31/por-cuarta-ocasion-cierran-puente-paso-del-norte-784864.html>
- Villalpando, R., & Henríquez, E. (2019, abril 18). *Unos 900 cubanos llegan a Juárez; buscan ingresar a EU*. <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2019/04/18/politica/009n1pol>

NOTES

1. Throughout the text I use Ciudad Juárez or Juárez indistinctly.
2. Interview with local scholar.
3. Interview with local scholar.
4. Data available at https://portales.segob.gob.mx/es/PoliticaMigratoria/Series_historicas
5. Interview with a local scholar.
6. This policy, an interpretation of the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966, stated that Cuban nationals who arrived at the United States' shores (dry feet) would be allowed to stay, and would be offered an expedited path towards legal permanent residency and citizenship afterwards.
7. There is no exact data of the number of Cubans that arrived in Ciudad Juárez during that time-period. However, several sources estimate the number to be several hundreds and 4,000 (ADN CUBA, 2019; Univision, 2019; Villalpando & Henríquez, 2019).

8. Translations are mine
9. Consejo Estatal de Población
10. Consejo Estatal para Protección y Atención a Migrantes
11. Metering lists were part of an asylum policy implemented by the U.S government since 2015. These were a series of lists where asylum seekers had to sign up before crossing in order to be able to seek asylum. People signed up on those lists and had to wait to be called in order to start their asylum process (American Immigration Council, 2021; CRS, 2022; Gil-Everaert et al., 2023).
12. Interview with a member of the COESPO
13. Some people interviewed for this project argued that there was only one actual shelter for migrants, La Casa del Migrante.
14. United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), International Organization for Migration (IOM), Doctors Without Borders (DWB).
15. Interview with local scholar
16. Interview with a member of the maquila sector
17. Interview with a member of the maquila sector
18. Collective Interview with members of Iniciativa Juárez
19. Collective Interview with members of Iniciativa Juárez
20. Interview with local scholar
21. Interview with local scholar
22. Collective Interview with members of Iniciativa Juárez
23. Collective Interview with members of Iniciativa Juárez
24. Collective Interview with members of Iniciativa Juárez
25. Collective Interview with members of Iniciativa Juárez
26. Collective Interview with members of Iniciativa Juárez
27. Collective Interview with members of Iniciativa Juárez
28. Collective Interview with members of Iniciativa Juárez
29. Interview with member of the maquila sector.
30. Collective Interview with members of Iniciativa Juárez
31. Collective Interview with members of Iniciativa Juárez.
32. Collective Interview with members of Iniciativa Juárez
33. Collective Interview with members of Iniciativa Juárez.
34. Interview with member of the maquila sector.
35. Collective Interview with members of Iniciativa Juárez
36. Interview with member of the maquila sector.
37. Interview with local scholar
38. Collective Interview with members of Iniciativa Juárez.
39. Collective Interview with members of Iniciativa Juárez.
40. Collective Interview with members of Iniciativa Juárez.
41. Interview with local scholar and federal government official

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Isabel Gil-Everaert holds a PhD in Sociology from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), a Master's degree in Humanities and Social Thought from New York University (NYU), and a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM). She is currently an Associate Professor at the Center for International Relations of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences (FCPyS) at UNAM, where since 2025 she has coordinated the Mexico–U.S. Binational Relations Observatory. She is a member of Mexico's National System of Researchers (SNI) with the distinction of National Researcher Level 1. Her research focuses on the intersections of mobility, gender, inequalities, the sociology of time, qualitative research methods, and public policy. She is a member of the University Seminar on Studies of Internal Displacement, Migration, Exile, and Repatriation (SUDIMER); the Migration, Inequality, and Public Policy Seminar (MIGDEP) at El Colegio de México; the Seminar on Social Time Studies of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences at UNAM; as well as the Seminar on Theory and Methodology of the Center for International Relations at FCPyS–UNAM.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported financially by the Mission Foods Texas–Mexico Center at Southern Methodist University (SMU). I would also like to thank the Special Projects Office at El Colegio de México for its support in managing the project and its resources. This research would not have been possible without the support of the individuals and organizations in Ciudad Juárez who were willing to participate in interviews and opened the doors of their shelters, organizations, and institutions. Finally, my sincere thanks to Dr. Claudia Masferrer and to the Migration, Inequality, and Public Policies Seminar (MIGDEP) at El Colegio de México for all their support throughout the project and in the editing, review, and publication of this text.

EDITOR OF THE SERIES: Claudia Masferrer | February 2026
MIGDEP THANKS THE FUNDING GRANTED BY THE MISSION
FOODS TEXAS-MEXICO CENTER.

SMU Mission Foods
Texas-Mexico Center

NOTAS
SOBRE
+ MIGRACIÓN Y
DESIGUALDADES

Facebook Twitter @SeminarioMigdep
Email migdep@colmex.mx
migdep.colmex.mx