

Why are so many migrants suddenly arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border?

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The recent surge in migrant families arriving at the border is being driven by several factors — including extreme poverty, violence, and political instability pushing migrants in Central America to flee.

The strong U.S. economy also is drawing migrants looking for jobs.

But the development of transportation networks by smuggling organizations that quickly shuttle migrants through Mexico and the Trump administration's own deterrence policies, including threats to shut down the southern border, are also fueling the influx, analysts say.

On Friday, Trump again threatened to close the U.S.-Mexico border as soon as next week, unless Mexico takes steps to stop the flow of U.S.-bound migrants traveling through its country.

But that threat, which Trump has made in the past, along with other recent policies aimed at deterring migrants from coming, are having the reverse effect, analysts say. It signals to migrants thinking of making the trip that now is the time to come — before the door closes.

Smuggling organizations have developed transportation networks capable of busing migrants from southern Mexico to the U.S. border in a matter of days. The development of the rapid transportation networks first was reported by The Washington Post, citing information from U.S. officials.

The smuggling transportation network is "really having a snowball effect," where migrants can make it through Mexico within three days, and then notify family members and friends back home, triggering more to follow, said David Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

At the same time, smugglers are also capitalizing on the Trump administration's policies, including the so-called Remain in Mexico policy, that sends migrants seeking asylum in the U.S. back to Mexico to wait until their case is decided.

"You had the administration announce a policy, Remain in Mexico, which is basically an advertisement for the smuggling organizations," Bier said.

The smuggling organizations are "notifying migrants that 'It's now or never. The whole process is going to shut down,'" Bier said. "That's really the kind of messaging that causes this kind of a rush."

Strong signals to migrants, smugglers

The number of migrant families and unaccompanied minors arriving the border from Central America has been growing steadily for years.

The number began to surge last summer after the Trump administration, amid an international outcry, was forced to abandon a zero-tolerance policy at the border that resulted in several thousand children being separated from their parents.

The Trump administration also has been unable to follow through on vows to ramp up deportation of migrant families who don't qualify for asylum.

Trump has also been unable to convince Congress to change immigration laws and court orders he says have created "loopholes" in the asylum system. Those "loopholes," Trump argues, encourage migrants to come illegally and then to fraudulently ask for asylum, knowing those with children will be quickly released and then allowed to remain in the U.S. for years while their asylum cases are pending in swamped immigration courts.

The failure to follow through on policies aimed at deterring migrants is helping fuel the current wave, said Randy Capps, director of research and U.S. programs at the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank.

"That sends two strong signals to would-be migrants and their smugglers," Capps said. "Right now the Trump administration, the U.S. government, can't stop you from entering the country. The second message is, 'We are working really hard to find a way to stop you, and we may be able do that soon, so you better come now.'"

Smuggling organizations exploiting migrants was also behind a similar surge in unaccompanied minors in the spring and summer of 2014, said Maureen Meyer, director for Mexico and migrant rights at the Washington Office on Latin America, a human rights advocacy group.

"They were telling individuals, 'You have a permission to come to the U.S. — and you need to come now or it's going to expire,'" Meyer said. "They are always finding clever ways to take advantage of people's desperation, vulnerability, and insecurity to tell them that the best option for them is to come to the United States without giving many of them any real idea of what that might actually look like at the border."

Now smugglers are telling migrant families that "if you are coming with your children, you will not be detained" if you ask for asylum, she said.

"A lot of the people coming are unaccompanied children and families who are coming to the U.S. and are seeking protection and are wanting asylum," Meyer said. "They are very different from the traditional, single-male, economic migrant."

Why the wave of family migrants?

Overall, Border Patrol apprehensions in recent years have remained far below levels seen in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when in 2000 they peaked at 1.6 million apprehensions.

But the current wave of migrant families — and to a lesser extent, minors arriving unaccompanied by parents — is unprecedented.

During the first four months of the current fiscal year, the Border Patrol apprehended 136,150 migrants made up of adults and children who crossed illegally. That was more than the 107,212 migrants apprehended as families during the entire previous year, which set a record.

In October, ICE, overwhelmed by the surge, began releasing large groups of families at local churches, shelters, and bus stations in communities near the border, including Phoenix, just days after they had been apprehended and processed by the Border Patrol.

Since Dec. 21, the agency has released 108,500 migrant family members. Of that, 18,500 were released in the Phoenix area or other communities in Arizona; 47,500 in communities in south Texas; 31,500 in El Paso; and 1,000 in San Diego, the data shows.

"We face a cascading crisis at our southern border. The system is in free fall," Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, said in a statement.

Exodus from Guatemala, Honduras

About 80 percent of the families arriving at the border are from Guatemala and Honduras.

Those two countries have high levels of poverty and violence, and also have experienced recent political instability, which is prompting migrant families to flee, Capps said.

Bier said the strong U.S. economy and low unemployment rate is also drawing migrants.

"I think that is a huge part of it," said Bier, noting that illegal immigration to the U.S. increased when the economy was booming in the 2000s but fell dramatically during the Great Recession.

"So yeah, another recession would be a great way to stop the flow of migrants," Bier said. "At the end of the day, people need jobs, and if they hear that people coming north are getting jobs, they are going to keep coming."

What are possible solutions?

It will be difficult to reverse the current wave of migrant families arriving at the border now that the transportation networks are set up, Bier said.

He advocates that the U.S. increase the number of humanitarian and other visas to allow families escaping poverty and violence in Central America to come to the U.S. legally, rather than turning to smuggling organizations.

Capps at the Migration Policy Institute said that many of migrant families arriving at the border most likely don't qualify for asylum, which is only granted to migrants fleeing political and other forms of persecution, not poverty or violence in general.

One short-term solution within the president's authority would be to allow asylum officers to decide asylum cases instead of judges in immigration courts. That could speed up the process to months.

Those granted asylum would be allowed to stay, while those who did not qualify would have to quickly leave — rather than being allowed to remain in the U.S. for years until their cases were decided in overwhelmed immigration courts, he said

Long term, however, the U.S. will have to work with Central American countries to address the root causes that are driving migrants to leave, such as promoting economic development, combating corruption, and reducing violence, Meyer said.

"It's not about deterrence as much as addressing why people are coming," Meyer said. "This is the one area where Trump has not focused any effort —and in fact, he is working to actively reduce assistance to Central America."