

Why illegal crossings on America's southern border have hit an 11-year high

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On March 5th, Kevin McAleenan, the commissioner of Customs and Border Protection, announced that February had seen an eleven-year high in unauthorised border crossings from Mexico. He called this a “both a border security and a humanitarian crisis,” and suggested it “enables smuggling while enriching criminals.” That echoes the language of President Donald Trump who argues the situation on America's southern border warrants a national emergency—and a border wall.

The crisis is not an issue of national security. As David Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank, has noted, there has not been a terrorist attack committed in America by a person who crossed the border illegally in more than four decades.

Undocumented immigrants as a group are considerably more law-abiding than American citizens. Migrants as a whole are less than half as likely as natural-born Americans to be in jail. Meanwhile the value of drugs seized by an average Border Patrol agent has dropped 70% since 2013, in part because the widespread legalisation of marijuana within America has reduced demands for imports.

But the number of people crossing the Mexican border is on an upswing. In February this year, more than 76,000 undocumented migrants were detained, the highest total for that month since 2007. That is still dwarfed by the numbers in earlier decades. In 2000, 1.64m people were apprehended at the southern border compared to 397,000 in 2018. The crisis now, which is a humanitarian one, has been caused in part by the changing demographic makeup of those crossing and the way they are treated once they have crossed.

More than half of those detained in February of this year were in “family units” claiming asylum from violence in Central America. El Salvador and Honduras have the world's highest murder rates; increasing violence in those countries may have fuelled the rise in the number of families claiming asylum. They cannot be sent back across the border without legal proceedings—unlike the single adult migrants that accounted for the considerable bulk of apprehensions 20 years ago. Add the fact that fewer families are being released before asylum proceedings and the result is an overburdened custody system.

In a failed attempt to reduce the flow of asylum seekers, the Department of Homeland Security has been turning away applicants at official entry points along the Mexican border. As a result, families have moved to cross in remote areas where their journeys can become a lot more complex and dangerous. Mr Bier says that in 1998 the Border Patrol found one dead migrant for

every 5,767 apprehensions. That climbed in 2017 to one for every 1,034. And when asylum seekers are apprehended, there are few staff and limited facilities to receive them. That worsens both delays and risks for asylum seekers.

Earlier this year the Trump administration requested \$800m worth of additional resources to care for children and families at the border. But the request was tied to demands for funding a border wall, which Congress rejected. The Homeland Security budget passed in February provided financing for humanitarian work, but it reduced financing for detention centres on the grounds Congress preferred alternatives including monitoring asylum seekers in the community. That is an approach resisted by the administration. A bipartisan agreement on a properly financed policy covering families seeking asylum on the southern border should be an urgent priority.