



Trump's Border Wall Could Result In More Child Deaths, Advocates Worry

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The government shutdown has dragged on for two weeks due to President Donald Trump's insistence on border wall funding. And while Trump is characterizing the barrier as a non-negotiable tenet of border security, immigrant experts told HuffPost it's an ineffective solution that will endanger migrant families.

Advocates say the wall could force people to take dangerous journeys to cross the border or threaten parents and children's health by making them languish in unsanitary shelters near ports of entry. Experts are especially concerned about the well-being of migrant kids after a boy and a girl recently died in Border Patrol custody.

"Fortifying the border is just going to lead to more deaths," said Elissa Steglich, a law professor at the University of Texas at Austin who teaches a clinic for immigrant families. "[It's] giving business to sophisticated smugglers who are going to be taking migrants through more perilous and life-threatening circumstances."

The number of migrant families being apprehended at the border reached record-high levels of more than 25,000 last month — a number that's risen by more than 13 percent since 2013.

Experts say Trump's wall, which the Department Of Homeland Security estimated would amount to more than 330 miles of fencing, won't deter families from trying to cross the border even as it makes their journeys more dangerous.

"You can't deter away a refugee flow," said Jennifer Podkul, the director of policy for Kids in Need of Defense. "If someone thinks they are not going to live if they stay in their country of origin, they will go and try to find safety somewhere else."

In the '90s, the government built fences in border cities such as San Diego, California, and El Paso, Texas, which forced immigrants to make more perilous journeys through the mountains and desert. The number of migrants who died trying to reach the U.S. has skyrocketed and the bodies of nearly 3,000 migrants have been found in southern Arizona since 2000, according to the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner.

The number of families apprehended by Border Patrol while traveling through the El Paso sector, which includes a part of the Chihuahuan Desert, has risen by more than 1,500 percent over the past year because of policies that dissuade immigrants from using legal ports of entry and an increased military presence at the border. Advocates worry a border wall will only exacerbate the

problem and lead to more health issues for children traveling through remote regions that lack access to medical services.

In December, 7-year-old Jackelin Caal Maquin traveled from Guatemala through the New Mexico desert with her father before dying from dehydration and shock in Border Patrol custody. After turning themselves in to Border Patrol agents, Caal and her father traveled three hours by bus to the nearest Border Patrol station in Lordsburg, New Mexico. Jackelin was later transported by helicopter to a children's hospital after having seizures.

“The U.S. government has made a strategic decision to force people to only cross in areas where death is more likely,” said David Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity. “[A wall] will create more deaths in the desert and more people suffering on their way here.”

Fortifying the border is just going to lead to more deaths. Elissa Steglich, University of Texas at Austin

Immigration experts say a border wall will also drive migrant families to use smugglers to navigate precarious border crossing routes. Some smugglers are involved in human trafficking or the drug trade, putting children in extremely dangerous situations. Steglich's child clients have told her stories of being forced into prostitution, made to carry drugs across the border or being locked in hotel rooms for weeks.

“Anytime you make it more difficult to cross, you empower cartel and smugglers and organized criminals who control the crossing points and the border,” said Bier.

Experts also worry that a wall will cause further backlogs at legal ports of entry, where some migrants have been waiting for months to cross the border due to the Trump administration's crackdown on asylum-seekers. As a result, thousands of immigrants who arrived in Tijuana, Mexico, with a migrant caravan last month are languishing in sometimes unsanitary shelters for their turn to legally cross the border.

Others have tried to enter the U.S. between ports of entry, which can be especially dangerous for children. Last month, two Guatemalan teens injured themselves after climbing the border wall separating Arizona from Mexico and falling 18 feet. Other migrants, including children, have been tear-gassed or hit with rubber bullets while trying to cross the border illegally.

Immigration experts say the money Trump is requesting to build a wall would be better spent on more Border Patrol agents to process migrants, a more efficient immigration court system and technology to detect drugs and weapons at the border.

Steglich says that in addition to forcing people into physically dangerous situations, the wall enforces a dangerous mentality that migrants should be treated like criminals instead of humans.

“If you are looking at a migrant as a national security threat, you're going to be more callous,” she said. “You're not going to be as attentive to the humanitarian needs of a mother or child before you.”