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Obama U.S. immigration policy change increases child refugee numbers

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The recent surge of foreign children trying to cross the southern U.S. border is becoming a humanitarian crisis. Thousands of kids are flooding into the country without family, food or shelter.

And while President Barack Obama's efforts to remedy the situation — with the help of \$1.4 billion in taxpayer dollars — are essential, his own actions have contributed to the emergency.

When the president ignores established policies and bypasses Congress and the deliberative process to make law with his pen and phone, he shouldn't be surprised when chaos follows.

The president has made immigration reform a priority, and there's no question it's needed. But he's put much of his agenda in place without the debate and compromise that should accompany sound lawmaking, and the result has been policies that weren't thoroughly thought out.

The president issued the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival Act by executive order in 2012, allowing undocumented children who were brought here by their parents to stay in the U.S. for two years or more, if they meet certain requirements.

An unintended consequence is that parents now believe that if they send their children alone across the U.S. border, they will receive a permit to stay even if apprehended by Border Patrol. The policy was never intended to invite a wave of children to enter the country without their parents, but that's been the result.

It's a heartbreaking situation, particularly since some of these children are trying to escape violence and danger, in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

Another well-intentioned policy, a 2008 law — adopted before Obama took office — requires U.S. officials to investigate whether children who cross the border have been abused or are the victims of sex trafficking.

But the necessary resources weren't attached to the law, which has caused a severe backlog in the border patrol system. "The bureaucracy hasn't adapted," says Alex Nowrasteh, immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C. "They should have fixed that law to streamline processes and made it quicker to get kids to their families."

Prior to 2012, the Office of Refugee Resettlement cared for 7,000 to 8,000 unaccompanied children. In 2012 the number rose to 13,625, then almost doubled to 24,668 in 2013.

This year, there's been a 92 percent increase child refugees, to 47,000, a number that is projected to reach up to 90,000.

The U.S. spends about \$20 billion annually on immigration-related services, so a \$1.4 billion increase in spending is no small amount. More will likely be needed.

The federal government must do everything within its power to get these children out of government detention centers and either returned to their families or placed under the care of organizations equipped to care for them.

Obama's intention has been to not punish children who are in the U.S. because their families brought them here, or left them behind.

But he failed to weigh the full consequences of enacting such broad allowances without the backing of Congress, and now thousands of children remain alone on a border in increasingly desperate conditions.