

# BUSINESS INSIDER

## **THE TRUTH ABOUT THE BORDER CRISIS: Experts say there is no security crisis, but there is a simple way to fix immigration — and it's not a wall**

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- President Donald Trump's address to the nation Tuesday night warned of a life-threatening crisis of illegal immigration erupting at the southern border.
- Experts say there is no crisis, and the problems that do exist at the border can't be solved with a wall.
- A wall won't stop migrants desperate to flee their home countries. Nor will it stop the flood of drugs entering the US mostly through the ports of entry. Nor will it solve crime from unauthorized immigrants, which occurs at a lower rate than among US-born citizens.
- What will reduce illegal immigration, however, is providing a way for migrants to come legally, experts say.

President Donald Trump's televised address to the nation on Tuesday night warned of a nationwide, life-threatening crisis stemming from the US-Mexico border, wrought by an alleged influx of unauthorized immigrants.

He described a series of gruesome crimes, detailing immigrants who had allegedly beheaded, dismembered, raped, stabbed, or beat American citizens. He declared that "thousands" more will be killed "if we don't act right now."

The president described the situation as a "growing humanitarian and security crisis at our southern border."

But the reality, experts say, is far different. And they say the "physical barrier" Trump is demanding will not solve the violence Trump depicted, nor the very real problems that do exist along the southern border.

"There's not a crisis at the border," said Jordan Bruneau, a senior policy analyst for the conservative-leaning Becoming American Initiative. "A border wall is a band-aid solution to the situation of illegal immigrants wanting to come to the country."

The flaws in Trump's arguments demonstrated multiple misconceptions about problems faced at the US-Mexico border, the people who cross the border, and how they cross it.

In his televised address, the president cited drugs pouring through the border as a reason to build a border barrier, saying, "Every week, 300 of our citizens are killed by heroin alone, 90% of which floods across from our southern border."

But government data shows that the vast majority of drugs come through legal ports of entry where they are smuggled in using vehicles, not unguarded stretches of the border.

Trump also decried "uncontrolled, illegal migration," even though most unauthorized immigrants currently in the US entered the country legally and overstayed their visas, and illegal border crossings remain near the bottom of a 40-year low.

He also seized on the idea that criminal immigrants jeopardize the safety of Americans, arguing that "thousands of Americans have been brutally killed by those who illegally entered our country and thousands more lives will be lost if we don't act right now."

But multiple studies have shown that immigrants commit far fewer crimes than native-born Americans.

Alex Nowrasteh, a senior policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute who has researched the issue, said that Trump was trying to whip up fear among Americans about a problem that has statistical significance.

"They absolutely should not be as frightened as he thinks they should be," he told INSIDER. "[Trump] beat to death the notion that immigrants are coming here to kill us, to murder us, to rape us, to rob from us. And the evidence simply does not support that. It is untrue, it has been repeated ad nauseam, and I don't think the American public believes it."

Though Trump pointed out specific cases of immigrants accused of brutal crimes — including a California police officer who was shot to death during a traffic stop last month, allegedly at the hands of an unauthorized immigrant — Nowrasteh said anecdotes of violent crimes do not represent a trend among immigrants.

Instead, Nowrasteh said, the data shows that the American public has more to fear from their fellow US-born citizens.

"Out of any large population like that, there's going to be some bad apples, of course. And some immigrants have done horrible things and committed terrible crimes," he said. "But that's no reason to punish the immigrants who haven't done anything. And when we take a look at the evidence, they are less likely to commit homicides, they are less likely to commit crimes, they are less likely to be incarcerated than native-born Americans."

It doesn't all add up to a "security crisis" at the border. But there is a clear problem.

There may not be a security crisis at the border, but there is a humanitarian crisis unfolding as detention centers shelters continue to run at or above capacity. Two children who traveled to the US from Guatemala recently died while in custody, raising questions about the government's ability to care for the influx of migrants.

But much of the controversy that has erupted along the border within the last year has stemmed from the changing demographics of migrants at the border — not the number who are crossing.

Roughly 20 years ago, Border Patrol agents were annually arresting 1.6 million people at the border, many of them single, Mexican men looking for work. Nowadays, Border Patrol agents are arresting a fraction of that — fewer than 400,000 in the fiscal year 2018— and they are primarily arresting Central American families fleeing poverty and violence and seeking asylum.

Over the last year, the number of families apprehended crossing the US-Mexico border has shot up to an all-time high. Customs and Border Protection data obtained by The Washington Post this week shows that a record 27,518 members of families were apprehended in December 2018 alone.

"There is indeed a humanitarian crisis at the border — but it is one of this administration's own making," Lorella Praeli, deputy political director of the American Civil Liberties Union, said in a statement. "Its manufactured security emergency isn't credible. President Trump and [Homeland Security] Secretary Nielsen have lied about border statistics and conditions, continued to push narratives that are proven false, and egregiously distorted realities."

This surge in migrant families, many of whom request asylum once they arrive in the US, has triggered a slew of logistical problems that authorities have struggled to accommodate. Trump administration officials have conceded that the Border Patrol stations where migrants are brought after arrest were never intended to shelter children.

"They're designed to be problematic and not safe," Anne Chandler, executive director of the Tahirih Justice Center's Houston office, told INSIDER. "The other issue is that we have border control strategies that didn't start in this administration, but date back to the 80s, where we put in measures to try to hamper the abilities of individuals to cross our border, pushing individuals into more desolate areas."

The Trump administration has sought to temper the flow of asylum-seekers with a variety of deterrence policies, perhaps the most infamous being last spring's family separations, which split thousands of migrant children from their parents and prompted multiple lawsuits and a months-long effort to reunite them.

The administration has also drawn fire for imposing a practice called "metering," allowing only a small number of migrants at a time to enter the US at ports of entry to seek asylum. But the practice has largely backfired. Thousands of migrants from multiple caravans remain stalled in Tijuana, Mexico, living on streets and in overflowing shelters, and growing so impatient that some simply jump the US border fence.

And a wall won't alleviate the influx of asylum seekers, either.

The problem with these strategies, Chandler said, is that they're not effective deterrents for migrants who are desperate and have little to lose. The fencing that already exists along the US-Mexico border hasn't dissuaded them from crossing, and neither would a wall.

Instead, it's pushed migrants to travel further into the desert to cross in unguarded areas.

"When they are pushed into these more remote areas to cross the border, their vulnerability and their health situation escalates," Chandler said. "In a situation like today, when we have metering

going on at every border point that I know about ... when we're denying that and putting individuals at more difficult points of entry, you increase the vulnerability of kids."

None of these problems — the influx of families, the lack of resources awaiting them, and the fact that some illegally enter the US before requesting asylum, would be solved with a wall, Nowrasteh said.

"These people are coming in and turning themselves in to Border Patrol to ask for asylum, primarily. A border wall won't change that at all," he said.

He added that allowing migrant families to apply for work visas upfront, instead of seeking roundabout ways to enter the US and request asylum, would cut down on illegal entries and actually produce a net benefit for the US.

"There will be more people here to work hard to achieve the American dream, to buy goods and services, to rent property and otherwise engage in the economy," Nowrasteh said. "On top of that, they are less likely to commit crime, less likely to commit terrorism, and less likely to have other social pathologies. So it's a pretty big win across the board."

Instead of building a wall, experts say we should fix our existing pathway for asylum seekers.

A better way to allocate the \$5.7 billion Trump is demanding for the wall would be to facilitate the flow of asylum-seekers currently entering the country, Nowrasteh said. That would include investing in more Border Patrol agents, hiring more immigration judges, and creating detention spaces with humane conditions.

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But instead, the Trump administration has sought to demonize migrants, using a caravan of migrants as a scare tactic before the 2018 midterm elections, and accusing them of filing frivolous asylum claims when their lives aren't truly in danger in their home countries.

The latter accusation isn't necessarily incorrect, Bruneau, of the conservative-leaning Becoming American Initiative, said. But he added that there's nothing wrong with a migrant looking for work in the US.

Instead of turning them away, he said, why not let them come legally?

"A big portion of them are economic migrants. And there's nothing wrong with that — that is the American tradition," he said. "They're coming to seek a better life, and if they want to come here to work ... there should be a way for them to do so. And real Republicans should try to look to address this underlying problem."

Despite Trump's claim on Tuesday that America welcomes "lawful immigrants who enrich our society and contribute to our nation," there are few options for those who want to enter the country to work. The pathways to legal immigration that do exist are riddled with bureaucratic hurdles.

Nowrasteh said there's little reason to oppose legal immigration — if Central American migrants can enter the country, that just means there are more people to work, buy goods and services, and

rent property. He argues that even so-called "low-skilled" immigrants raise wages and create jobs.

Despite the commonly held assumption that immigrants take American workers' jobs, Nowrasteh said evidence points to the contrary. Immigrants typically compete against other immigrants in the US workforce, not Americans.

"The most effective solution is to change the rules so that these people can come here legally on a work visa, rather than having to sneak in and ask for asylum, or ask for asylum up-front," Nowrasteh said.

"On top of that, they are less likely to commit crime, less likely to commit terrorism, and less likely to have other social pathologies," he continued. "So it's a pretty big win across the board. Now, if you just don't like foreigners, then there's nothing I can tell you."